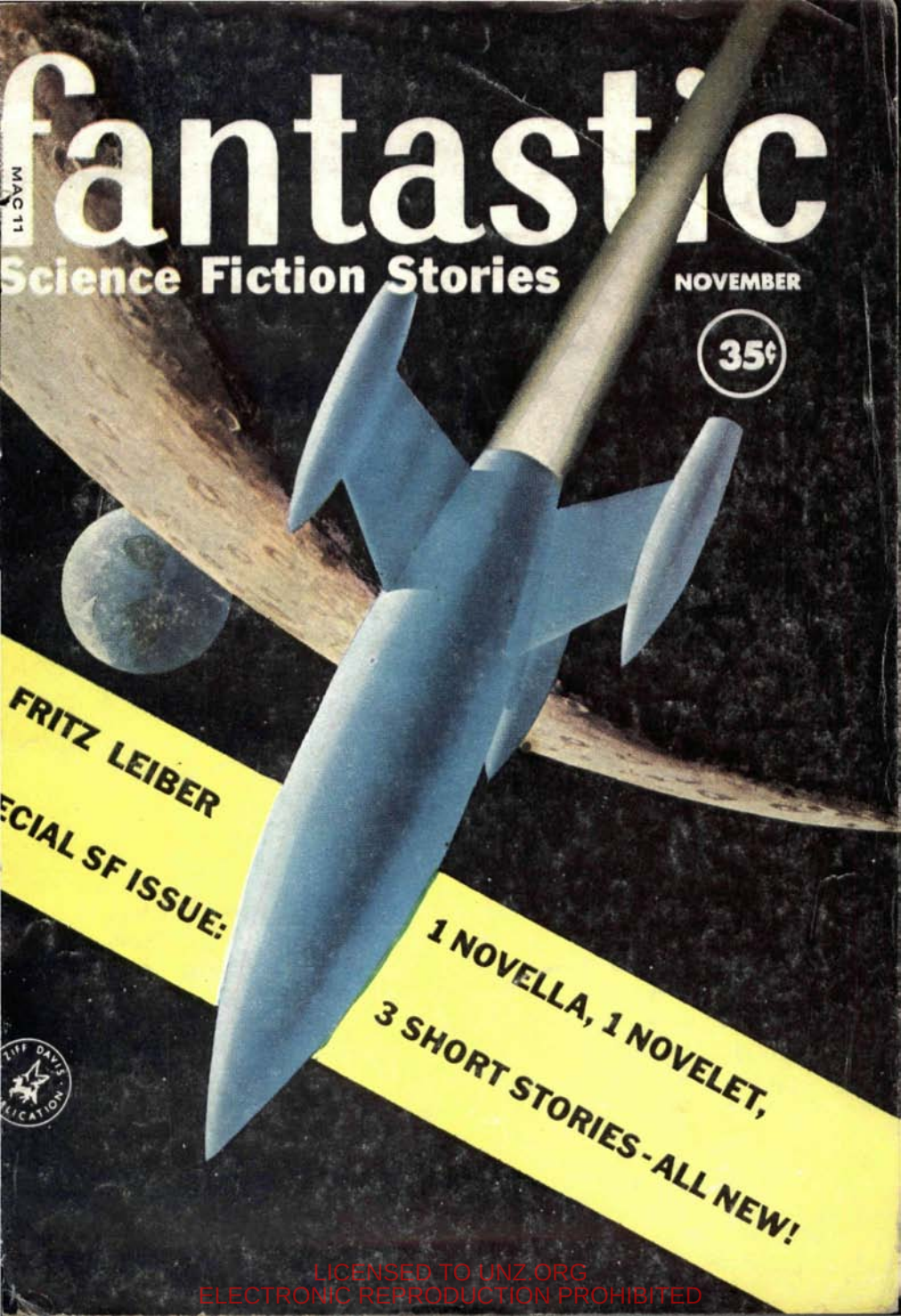

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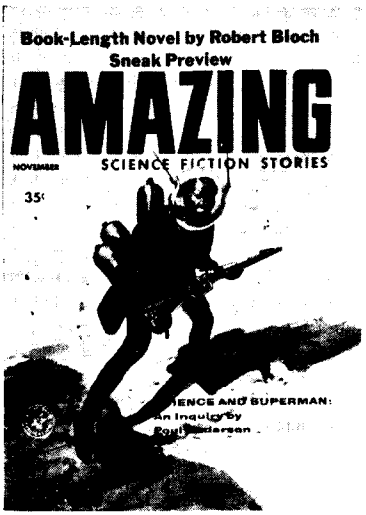

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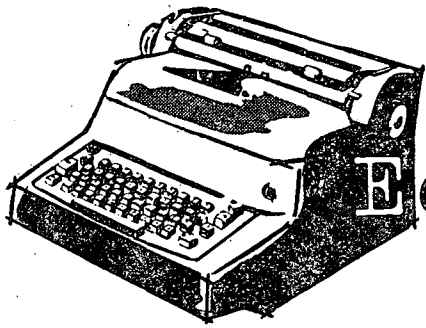

Editorial

PERHAPS some old-timers will be able successfully to contradict me, but I would hazard the statement that this is the first time in a very long time, if ever, that an entire issue of a science-fiction magazine was devoted to the work of a single writer.

This issue—as you must know from the cover—features the output of Fritz Leiber.

It is a strange thing that editors shy away from one-writer issues. Variety is always the keyword; the reader must be given lots of *different* writers; and if by chance the exigencies of scheduling force an editor to use two stories by the same author in the same issue, he feels it necessary to conceal this from the reader by using a pseudonym on one of the stories.

Why should this be so? Art galleries make a strong point of featuring exhibits of paintings by one artist. Symphony orchestras will occasionally devote an entire program to one composer. And why not? This gives the audience a chance to steep itself utterly in one man's imagination and technique; to comprehend his basic philosophy; and to marvel at his variety.

And so we feel proud to devote an entire issue of *Fantastic* to the writings—all brand new—of Fritz Leiber. Writings in various moods, of various lengths, about various things—a tremendous display of versatility, a true *tour de force.*

We had thought of dedicating this issue to Leiber's honor, as a veteran writer in the genre. On second thought, however, the honor is all ours.—NL

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To the god-crazed crowd there was no
was happening—the divine Issek

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question about what was among them!

If you ran a popular enough religion, there was money in it. And for money, men took risks, especially when there were . . .

LEAN TIMES IN LANKHMAR

ONCE upon a time in Lankhmar, City of the Black Toga, in the world of Nehwon, two years after the Year of the Feathered Death, Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser parted their ways.

Exactly what caused the tall brawling barbarian and the slim elusive Prince of Thieves to fall out, and the mighty adventuring partnership to be broken, is uncertainly known and was at the time the subject of much speculation. Some said they had quarreled over a girl. Others maintained, with even greater unlikelihood, that they had disagreed over the

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proper division of a loot of jewels raped from Muulsh the Moneylender. Srith of the Scrolls suggests that their mutual cooling off was largely the reflection of a supernatural enmity existing at the time between Sheelba of the Eyeless Face, Fafhrd's demonic one-time mentor, and Ningauble of the Seven Eyes, the Mouser's alien and multiserpentine patron.

The likeliest explanation, which runs directly counter to the Muulsh Hypothesis, is simply that times were hard in Lankhmar, adventures few and uninviting, and that the two heroes had reached that point in life when hard-pressed men desire to admix even the rarest quests and pleasurings with certain prudent activities leading either to financial or to spiritual security, though seldom if ever to both.

This theory—that boredom and insecurity, and a difference of opinion as to how these dismal feelings might best be dealt with, chiefly underlay the estrangement of the twain . . . this theory may account for and perhaps even subsume the otherwise ridiculous suggestion that the two comrades fell out over the proper spelling of Fafhrd's name, the Mouser perversely favoring a simple Lankhmarian equivalent of "Faferd" while the name's owner insisted that only the original mouth-filling agglomeration of consonants could continue to satisfy his ear and eye and his semi-literate, barbarous sense of the fitness of things. Bored and insecure men will loose arrows at dust motes.

Certain it is that their friendship, though not utterly fractured, grew very cold and that their life-ways, though both continuing in Lankhmar, diverged remarkably.

The Gray Mouser entered the service of one Pulg, a rising racketeer of small religions, a lord of Lankhmar's dark underworld who levied tribute from the priests of all godlets seeking to become gods—on pain of various unpleasant, disturbing and revolting things happening at future services of the defaulting godlet. If a priest didn't pay Pulg, his miracles were sure to misfire, his congregation and collection would fall off sharply, and it was quite possible that a bruised skin and broken bones would be his lot.

Accompanied by three or four of Pulg's bullies and frequently a slim dancing girl or

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two, the Mouser became a familiar and newly-ominous sight in Lankhmar's Street of the Gods, which leads from the Marsh Gate to the distant docks and the Citadel. He still wore gray, went close-hooded, and carried Cat's Claw and Scalpel at his side, but the dagger and slim curving sword kept in their sheaths. Knowing from of old that a threat is generally more effective than its execution, he limited his activities to the handling of conversations and cash. "I speak for Plug—Plug with a *guh!*" was his usual opening. Later, if holy men grew recalcitrant or overly keen in their bargaining and it became necessary to maul saintlets and break up services, he would sign the bullies to take these disciplinary measures while he himself stood idly by, generally in slow sardonic converse with the attendant girl or girls and often munching sweetmeats. As the months passed, the Mouser grew fat and the dancing girls successively more child-slim and submissive-eyed.

Fafhrd, on the other hand, broke his longsword across his knee (cutting himself badly in the act), tore from his garments the few remaining ornaments (dull worthless scraps of base metal) and bits of ratty fur, foreswore strong drink and all allied pleasures (he had been on small beer and womanless for some time), and became the sole acolyte of Bwadres, the sole priest of Issek of the Jug. Fafhrd let his beard grow until it was as long as his shoulder-brushing hair, he became lean and hollow-cheeked and cavern-eyed, and his voice changed from bass to tenor, though *not* as a result of the distressing mutilation which some whispered he had inflicted upon himself—these last knew he had cut himself but lied wildly as to where.

The gods *in* Lankhmar (that is, the gods and candidates for divinity who dwell or camp, it may be said, in the Imperishable City, not the gods *of* Lankhmar—a very different and most secret and dire matter) . . . the gods in Lankhmar sometimes seem as if they must be as numberless as the grains of sand in the Great Eastern Desert. The vast majority of them began as men, or more strictly the memories of men who led ascetic, vision-haunted lives and died painful, messy deaths. One gets the impression that since the beginning of time an unending horde of their

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priests and apostles (or even the gods themselves, it makes little difference) have been crippling across that same desert, the Sinking Land, and the Great Salt Marsh to converge on Lankhmar's low, heavy-arched Marsh Gate—meanwhile suffering by the way various inevitable tortures, castrations, blindings and stonings, impalements, crucifixions, quarterings and so forth at the hands of eastern brigands and Mingol unbelievers who, one is tempted to think, were created solely for the purpose of seeing to the running of that cruel gantlet. Among the tormented holy throng are a few warlocks and witches seeking infernal immortality for their dark satanic would-be deities and a very few proto-goddesses—generally maidens reputed to have been enslaved for decades by sadistic magicians and ravished by whole tribes of Mingols.

Lankhmar itself and especially the earlier-mentioned street serves as the theatre or more precisely the intellectual and artistic testing-ground of the proto-gods after their more material but no more cruel sifting at the hands of the brigands and Mingols. A new god (his priest or priests, that is) will begin at the Marsh Gate and more or less slowly work his way up the Street of the Gods, renting a temple or preempting a few yards of cobbled pavement here and there, until he has found his proper level. A very few win their way to the region adjoining the Citadel and join the aristocracy of the gods *in* Lankhmar — transients still though resident there for centuries and even millennia (the gods *of* Lankhmar are as jealous as they are secret). Far more godlets, it can justly be said, play a one-night-stand near the Marsh Gate and then abruptly disappear, perhaps to seek cities where the audiences are less critical. The majority work their way about halfway up the Street of the Gods and then slowly work their way down again, resisting bitterly every inch and yard, until they once more reach the Marsh Gate and vanish forever from Langhmar and the memories of men.

Now Issek of the Jug, whom Fafhrd chose to serve, was one of the most lowly and unsuccessful of the gods, godlets rather, in Lankhmar. He had dwelt there for about thirteen years, during which time he had traveled only two

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squares up the Street of the Gods and was now back at the Marsh Gate again, ready for oblivion. He is not to be confused with Issek the Armless, Issek of the Burnt Legs, Flayed Issek, or any other of the numerous and colorfully mutilated divinities of that name. Indeed, his unpopularity may have been due in part to the fact that the manner of his death—racking—was not deemed particularly spectacular. A few scholars have confused him with Jugged Issek, an entirely different saintlet whose claim to immortality lay in his confinement for seventeen years in a not overly roomy earthenware jar. The Jug (Issek of the Jug's Jug) was supposed to contain Waters of Peace from the Cistern of Cillivat—but none apparently thirsted for them. Indeed, had you sought for a good example of a has-been god who had never really been anything, you could hardly have hit on a better choice then Issek of the Jug, while Bwadres was the very type of the failed priest—sere, senile, apologetic and mumbling. The reason that Fafhrd attached himself to Bwadres, rather than to any one of a vast number of livelier holy men with better prospects, was that he had once seen Bwadres pat a deaf-and-dumb child on the head *while* (so far as Bwadres could have known) *no one was looking* and the incident (possibly unique in Lankhmar) had stuck in the mind of the barbarian. But otherwise Bwadres was a most unexceptional old dodderer.

However, after Fafhrd became his acolyte, things somehow began to change.

In the first place, and even if he had contributed nothing else, Fafhrd made a very impressive one-man congregation from the very first day when he turned up so ragged-looking and bloody (from the cuts got breaking his longsword). His near seven-foot height and still warlike carriage stood out mountainously among the old women, children and assorted riff-raff who made up the odorous, noisy, and vastly fickle crowd of worshippers at the Marsh-Gate end of the Street of the Gods. One could not help thinking that if Issek of the Jug could attract one such worshipper the godlet must have unsuspected virtues. Fafhrd's formidable height, shoulder-breadth and bearing had one other advantage: he could maintain claim to a very respectable area of cobbles

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for Bwadres and Issek merely by stretching himself out to sleep on them after the night's services were over.

It was at this time that oafs and ruffians stopped elbowing Bwadres and spitting on him. Fafhrd was most pacific in his new personality —after all, Issek of the Jug was notably a godlet of peace —but Fafhrd had a fine barbaric feeling for the proprieties. If anyone took liberties with Bwadres or disturbed the various rituals of Issek-worship, he would find himself lifted up and set down somewhere else, with an admonitory *thud* if that seemed called for—a sort of informal one-stroke bastinado.

Bwadres himself brightened amazingly as a result of this wholly unexpected respite granted him and his divinity on the very brink of oblivion. He began to eat more often than twice a week and to comb his long skimpy beard. Soon his senility dropped away from him like an old cloak, leaving of itself only a mad stubborn gleam deep in his yellowly crust-edged eyes, and he began to preach the gospel of Issek of the Jug with a fervor and confidence that he had never shown before.

Meanwhile Fafhrd, in the second place, fairly soon began to contribute more to the promotion of the Issek-of-the-Jug cult than his size, presence, and notable talents as a chucker-out. After two months of self-imposed absolute silence, which he refused to break even to answer the simplest questions of Bwadres, who was at first considerably puzzled by his gigantic convert, Fafhrd procured a small broken lyre, repaired it, and began regularly to chant the Creed and History of Issek of the Jug at all services. He competed in no way with Bwadres, never chanted any of the litanies or presumed to bless in Issek's name, in fact he always kneeled and resumed silence while serving Bwadres as acolyte, but seated on the cobbles at the foot of the service area while Bwadres meditated between rituals at the head, he would strike melodious chords from his tiny lyre and chant away in a rather high-pitched, pleasing, romantically vibrant voice.

Now as a Northerner boy in the Cold Waste, far polewards of Lankhmar across the Inner Sea, the forested Land of the Eight Cities and the Trollstep Mountains, Fafhrd had been trained in the

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School of the Singing Skalds (so called, although they chanted rather than sang, because they pitched their voices tenor) rather than in the School of the Roaring Skalds (who pitched their voices base). This resumption of a childhood-inculcated style of elocution, which he also used in answering the few questions his humility would permit him to notice, was the real and sole reason for the change in Fafhrd's voice that was made the subject of gossip by those who had known him as the Gray Mouser's deep-voiced swordmate.

As delivered over and over by Fafhrd, the History of Issek of the Jug gradually altered, by small steps which even Bwadres could hardly cavil at had he wished, into something considerably more like the saga of a northern hero, though toned down in some respects. Issek had not slain dragons and other monsters as a child—that would have been against his Creed—he had only sported with them, swimming with leviathan, frisking with behemoth, and flying through the trackless spaces of air on the backs of wivern, griffin and hippogryph. Nor had Issek as a man scattered kings and emperors in battle, he had merely dumbfounded them and their quaking ministers by striding about on fields of poisoned sword-points, standing at attention in fiery furnaces, and treading water in tanks of boiling oil—the while delivering majestic sermons on brotherly love in perfect, intricately rhymed stanzas.

Bwadres' Issek had expired quite quickly, though with some kindly parting admonitions, after being disjointed on the rack. Fafhrd's Issek (now *the* Issek) had broken seven racks before he began seriously to weaken. Even when, supposedly dead, he had been loosed and had got his hands on the chief torturer's throat there had been enough strength remaining in them alone so that he had been able to strangle the wicked man with ease, although the latter was a champion of wrestlers among his people. However, Fafhrd's Issek had not done so—again it would have been quite against his Creed—he had merely broken the torturer's thick brass band of office from around his trembling neck and twisted it into an exquisitely beautiful symbol of the Jug before finally permitting his own ghost to escape from him into the eternal realms of spirit, there to con-

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tinue its wildly wonderful adventurings.

Now since the vast majority of the gods in Lankhmar, arising from the Eastern Lands or at least from the kindredly decadent southern country around Quarmall, had been in their earthly incarnations rather effete types, unable to bear more than a few minutes of hanging or a few hours of impalement, and with relatively little resistance to molten lead or showers of barbed darts, also not given overly to composing romantic poetry or to dashing exploits with strange beasts, it is hardly to be wondered that Issek of the Jug, as interpreted by Fafhrd, swiftly won and held the attention and soon thereafter also the devotion of a growing section of the usually unstable, gods-dazzled mob. In particular the vision of Issek of the Jug rising up with his rack, striding about with it on his back, breaking it, and then calmly waiting with arms voluntarily stretched above his head until another rack could be readied and attached to him ~~. . . that vision, in particular,~~ came to occupy a place of prime importance in the dreams and daydreams of many a porter, beggar, drab scullion, and the brats and aged dependents of such.

As a result of this popularity, Issek of the Jug was soon not only moving up the Street of the Gods for a second time —a rare enough feat in itself —but also moving at a greater velocity than any god had been known to attain in the modern era. Almost every service saw Bwadres and Fafhrd able to move their simple altar a few more yards toward the Citadel end as their swelling congregations overflowed areas temporarily sacred to gods of less drawing power, and frequently late-coming and untirable worshippers enabled them to keep up services until the sky was reddening with the dawn—ten or twelve repetitions of the ritual (and the yardage gain) in one night. Before long the make-up of their congregations had begun to change. Pursed and then fatter-pursed types showed up: mercenaries and merchants, sleek thieves and minor officials, jeweled courtesans and slumming aristocrats, shaven philosophers who scoffed lightly at Bwadres' tangled arguments and Issek's irrational Creed but who were secretly awed by the apparent sincerity of the ancient man and his giant poetical acolyte

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. . . and with these monied newcomers came, inevitably, the iron-tough hirelings of Pulg and other such hawks circling over the fowlyards of religion.

Naturally enough, this threatened to pose a considerable problem for the Gray Mouser.

So long as Issek, Bwadres and Fafhrd stayed within hooting range of the Marsh Gate, there was nothing to worry about. There when collection time came and Fafhrd circled the congregation with cupped hands, the take, if any, was in the form of moldy crusts, common vegetables past their prime, rags, twigs, bits of charcoal, and—very rarely, giving rise to shouts of wonder—bent and dinted greenish coins of brass. Such truck was below the notice of even lesser racketeers than Pulg, and Fafhrd had no trouble whatever in dealing with the puny and dull-witted types who sought to play Robber King in the Marsh Gate's shadow. More than once the Mouser managed to advise Fafhrd that this was an ideal state of affairs and that any considerable further progress of Issek up the Street of the Gods could lead only to great unpleasantness. The Mouser was nothing if not cautious and most prescient to boot. He liked, or firmly believed he liked, his newly-achieved security almost better than he liked himself. He knew that, as a recent hireling of Pulg, he was still being watched closely by the Great Man and that any appearance of continuing friendship with Fafhrd (for most outsiders thought they had quarreled irrevocably) might some day be counted against him. So on the occasions when he drifted down the Street of the Gods during off-hours—that is, by daylight, for religion is largely a nocturnal, torchlit business in Lankhmar—he would never seem to speak to Fafhrd directly. Nevertheless he would by seeming accident end up near Fafhrd and, while apparently engaged in some very different private business or pleasure (or perhaps come secretly to gloat over his large enemy's fallen estate—that was the Mouser's second line of defense against conceivable accusations by Pulg) he would manage considerable conversations out of the corner of his mouth, which Fafhrd would answer, if at all, in the same way—though in his case presumably from abstraction rather than policy.

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"Look, Fafhrd," the Mouser said on the third of such occasions, meanwhile pretending to study a skinny-limbed pot-bellied beggar girl, as if trying to decide whether a diet of lean meat and certain callisthenics would bring out in her a rare gaminesque beauty—"Look, Fafhrd, right here you have what you want, whatever that is—*I* think it's a chance to patch up poetry and squeak it at fools—but whatever it is, you *must* have it here near the Marsh Gate, for the only thing in the world that is not near the Marsh Gate is money, and you tell me you don't want that—the more fool you!—but let me tell you something: if you let Bwadres get any nearer the Citadel, yes even a pebble's toss, you will get money whether you want it or not, and with that money you and Bwadres will buy something, also willy-nilly and no matter how tightly you close your purse and shut your ears to the cries of the hawkers. That thing which you and Bwadres will buy is trouble."

Fafhrd answered only with a faint grunt that was the equivalent of a shoulder-shrug. He was looking steadily down past his bushy beard with almost cross-eyed concentration at something his long fingers were manipulating powerfully yet delicately, but that the large backs of his hands concealed from the Mouser's view.

"How is the old fool, by the by, since he's eating regularly?" the Mouser continued, leaning a hair closer in an effort to see what Fafhrd was handling. "Still stubborn as ever, eh? Still set on taking Issek to the Citadel? Still as unreasonable about . . . er . . . business matters?"

"Bwadres is a good man," Fafhrd said quietly.

"More and more that appears to be the heart of the trouble," the Mouser answered with a certain sardonic exasperation. "But look, Fafhrd, it's not necessary to change Bwadres' mind—I'm beginning to doubt whether even Sheelba and Ning, working together, could achieve that cosmic revolution. You can do by yourself all that needs to be done. Just give your poetry a little downbeat, add a little defeatism to Issek's Creed—even you must be tired by now of all this ridiculous mating of northern stoicism to southern masochism, and wanting a change. One theme's good as another to a true artist. Or, simpler still, merely refrain from

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moving Issek's altar up the street on your big night . . . or even move it down a little! —Bwadres gets so excited when you have big crowds that the old fool doesn't know which direction you're going, anyhow. You could progress like the well-frog. Or, wisest of all, merely prepare yourself to split the take before you hand over the collection to Bwadres. I could teach you the necessary legerdemain in the space of one dawn, though you really don't need it—with those huge hands you can palm anything."

"No," said Fafhrd.

"Suit yourself," the Mouser said very very lightly, though not quite unfeelingly. "Buy trouble if you will, death if you must. Fafhrd, what *is* that thing you're fiddling with? No, don't hand it to me, you idiot! Just let me glimpse it. By the Black Bones in the First Black Toga!—what *is* that?"

Without looking up or otherwise moving, Fafhrd had cupped his hands sideways, much as if he were displaying in the Mouser's direction a captive butterfly or beetle—and indeed it did seem at first glimpse as if it were a rare large beetle he was cautiously baring to view, one with a carapace of softly burnished gold.

"It is an offering to Issek," Fafhrd droned. "An offering made last night by a devout lady who is wed in spirit to the god."

"Yes, and to half the young aristos of Lankhmar too and not at all in spirit," the Mouser hissed. "I know one of Lessnya's double-spiral bracelets when I see it. Reputedly given her by the Twin Dukes of Ilthmar, by the by. What did you have to do to her to get it?—stop, don't answer. I know . . . recite poetry! Fafhrd, things are far worse than I dreamed. If Pulg knew you were already getting gold . . ." He let his whisper trail off. "But what have you *done* with it?"

"Fashioned it into a representation of the Holy Jug," Fafhrd answered, bowing his head a shade farther and opening his hands a bit wider and tipping them a trifle.

"So I see," the Mouser hissed. The soft gold had been twisted into a remarkably smooth strange knot. "And not a bad job either, though a most barbarous one. Not a bad job at all. Fafhrd, how you keep such a delicate feeling for curves when for six months you've slept without them against you is quite be-

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yond me. Doubtless such things go by opposites. Don't speak for a moment now, I'm getting an idea. And by the Black Scapula!—a good one! Fafhrd, you must give me that trinket so that I may give it to Pulg. No—please hear me out and then think this through!—not for the gold in it, not as a bribe or as part of a first split—I'm not asking that of you or Bwadres—but simply as a keepsake, a presentation piece. Fafhrd, I've been getting to know Pulg lately and I find he has a strange sentimental streak in him—he likes to get little gifts, little trophies, from his . . . er . . . customers, we sometimes call them. These curios must always be items relating to the god in question—chalices, censors, bones in silver filigree, jeweled amulets, that sort of thing. He likes to sit looking at his shelves of them and dream. Sometimes I think the man is getting religion without realizing it. If I should bring him this bauble he would—I know!—develop an affection for Issek. He would tell me to go easy on Bwadres. It would probably even be possible to put off the question of tribute money for . . . well, for three more squares at least."

"No," said Fafhrd.

"So be it, my friend. Come with me, my dear, I am going to buy you a steak." This second remark was in the Mouser's regular speaking voice and directed, of course, at the beggar girl, who reacted with a look of already practiced and rather langorous affright. "Not a fish steak either, puss. Did you know there were other kinds? Toss this coin to your mother, dear, and come. The stall is four squares up. No, we won't take a litter—you need the exercise. *Farewell—Death-seeker!*"

Despite the wash-my-hands-of-you tone of this last whisper, the Gray Mouser did what he could to put off the evil night of reckoning, devising more pressing tasks for Pulg's bullies and alleging that this or that omen was against the immediate settling of the Bwadres account—for Pulg, alongside his pink streak of sentimentality, had recently taken to sporting a gray one of superstition.

There would have been no insurmountable problem at all, of course, if Bwadres had only had that touch of realism about money matters that, when a true crisis arises, is almost invariably shown by even the fattest, greediest

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priest or the skinniest, most unworldly holy man. But Bwadres was stubborn—it was probably, as we have hinted, the sole remaining symptom, though a most inconvenient one, of his only seemingly cast-off senility. Not one rusty iron *tik* (the smallest coin of Lankhmar) would he pay to extortioners —such was Bwadres' boast. To make matters worse, if that were possible, he would not even *spend* money renting gaudy furniture or temple space for Issek, as was practically mandatory for gods progressing up the central stretch of the Street. Instead he averred that every tik collected, every bronze agol, every silver smerduk, every gold rilk, yes every diamond-in-amber glulditch! — would be saved to *buy* for Issek the finest temple at the Citadel end, in fact the temple of Aarth the Invisible All-Listener, accounted one of the most ancient and powerful of all the gods in Lankhmar.

Naturally this insane challenge, thrown out for all to hear, had the effect of still further increasing Issek's popularity and swelled his congregations with all sorts of folk who came, at first at least, purely as curiosity seekers. The odds on how far Issek would get up the Street how soon (for they regularly bet on such things in Lankhmar) began to switch wildly up and down as the affair got quite beyond the shrewd but essentially limited imaginations of bookmakers. Bwadres took to sleeping curled in the gutter around Issek's coffer (first an old garlic bag, later a small stout cask with a slit in the top for coins) and with Fafhrd curled around him. Only one of them slept at a time, the other rested but kept watch.

At one point the Mouser almost decided to slit Bwadres' throat as the only possible way off his dilemma. But he knew that such an act would be the one unforgivable crime against his new profession—it would be *bad for business* —and certain to ruin him forever with Pulg and all other extortioners if ever traced to him even in faintest suspicion. Bwadres must be roughed up if necessary, yes even tortured, but at the same time he must be treated in all ways as a goose who laid golden eggs. Moreover, the Mouser had a presentiment that putting Bwadres out of the way would not stop Issek. Not while Issek had Fafhrd.

What finally brought the af-

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fair to a head, or rather to its first head, and forced the Mouser's hand was the inescapable realization that if he held off any longer from putting the bite on Bwadres for Pulg, then rival extortioners —one Bashabek in particular —would do it on their own account. As the Number One Racketeer of Religions in Lankhmar, Pulg certainly had first grab, but if he delayed for an unreasonable length of time in making it (no matter on what grounds of omens or arguments about fattening the sacrifice) then Bwadres was anybody's victim—Bashabek's in particular, as Pulg's chief rival.

So it came about, as it so often does, that the Mouser's efforts to avert the evil nightfall only made it darker and stormier when it finally came down.

When at last that penultimate evening did arrive, signalized by a final warning sent Pulg by Bashabek, the Mouser, who had been hoping all along for some wonderful last-minute inspiration that never came, took what may seem to some a coward's way out. Making use of the beggar girl, whom he had named Lilyblack, and certain other of his creatures, he circulated a rumor that the Treasurer of the Temple of Aarth was preparing to decamp in a rented black sloop across the Inner Sea, taking with him all funds and temple-valuables, including a set of black-pearl-crusted altar furnishings, gift of the wife of the High Overlord, on which the split had not yet been made with Pulg. He timed the rumor so that it would return to him, by unimpeachable channels, just after he had set out for Issek's spot with four well-armed bullies.

It may be noted, in passing, that Aarth's Treasurer actually was in monetary hot waters and really had rented a black sloop. Which proved not only that the Mouser used good sound fabric for his fabrications, but also that Bwadres had by landlords' and bankers' standards made a very sound choice in selecting Issek's temple-to-be—whether by chance or by some strange shrewdness co-dwelling with his senile stubbornness.

The Mouser could not divert his whole expeditionary force, for Bwadres must be saved from Bashabek. However, he was able to split it with the almost certain knowledge that Pulg would consider his action the best

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strategy available at the moment. Three of the bullies he sent on with firm instructions to bring Bwadres to account, while he himself raced off with minimum guard to intercept the supposedly fleeing and loot-encumbered treasurer.

Of course the Mouser *could* have made himself part of the Bwadres-party, but that would have meant he would have had personally to best Fafhrd or be bested by him, and while the Mouser wanted to do everything possible for his friend he wanted to do just a little bit more than that (he thought) for his own security.

Some, as we have suggested, may think that in taking this way out the Gray Mouser was throwing his friend to the wolves. However, it must always be remembered that the Mouser knew Fafhrd.

The three bullies, who did *not* know Fafhrd (the Mouser had selected them for that reason), were pleased with the turn of events. An independent commission always meant the chance of some brilliant achievement and so perhaps of promotion. They waited for the first break between services, when there was inevitably considerable passing about and jostling. Then one, who had a small axe in his belt, went straight for Bwadres and his cask, which the holy man also used as altar, draping it for the purpose with the sacred garlic bag. Another drew sword and menaced Fafhrd, keeping sound distance from and careful watch on the giant. The third, adopting the jesting, rough-and-ready manner of the master of the show in a bawdy house, spoke ringing warnings to the crowd and kept a reasonably watchful eye on *them*. The folk of Lankhmar are so bound by tradition that it was unthinkable that they would interfere with any activities as legitimate as those of an extortioner—the Number One Extortioner, too—even in defense of a most favored priest, but there are occasional foreigners and madmen to be dealt with (though in Lankhmar even the madmen generally respect the traditions).

No one in the congregation saw the crucial thing that happened next, for their eyes were all on the first bully, who was lightly choking Bwadres with one hand while pointing his axe at the cask with the other. There was a cry of surprise and a clatter. The second bully, lunged forward

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toward Fafhrd, had dropped his sword and was shaking his hand as if it pained him. Without haste Fafhrd picked him up by the slack of his garments between his shoulder-blades, reached the first bully in two giant strides, slapped the axe from his hand, and picked him up likewise.

It was an impressive sight: the giant, gaunt-cheeked, bearded acolyte wearing his long robe of undyed camel's hair (recent gift of a votary) and standing with knees bent and feet wide-planted as he held aloft to either side a squirming bully.

But although indeed a most impressive tableau, it presented a made-to-order opening for the third bully, who instantly unsheathed his scimitar and, with an acrobat's smile and wave to the crowd, lunged forward long and low and swept his cruel sword upward toward the apex of the obtuse angle formed by the juncture of Fafhrd's legs.

The crowd shuddered and squealed with the thought of the poignancy of the blow.

There was a muffled *thud.* The third bully dropped *his* sword. Without changing his stance Fafhrd swept together the two bullies he was holding so that their heads met with a loud *thunk.* With an equally measured movement he swept them apart again and sent them sprawling to either side, unconscious, among the onlookers. Then stepping forward, still without seeming haste, he picked up the third bully by neck and crotch and pitched him a considerably greater distance into the crowd, where he bowled over two of Bashabek's henchmen who had been watching the proceedings with great interest.

There was absolute silence for three heartbeats, then the crowd applauded rapturously. While the tradition-bound Lankhmarians thought it highly proper for extortioners to extort, they also considered it completely in character for a strange acolyte to work miracles, and they never omitted to clap a good performance.

Bwadres, fingering his throat and still gasping a little, smiled with simple pleasure and when Fafhrd finally acknowledged the applause by dropping down cross-legged to the cobbles and bowing his head, the old priest launched instantly into a sermon in which he further electrified the crowd by several times hinting that, in his

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celestial realms *Issek was preparing to visit Lankhmar in person.* His acolyte's routing of the three evil men Bwadres attributed to the inspiration of Issek's might—to be interpreted as a sort of foretaste of the god's approaching reincarnation.

The most significant consequence of this victory of the doves over the hawks was a little midnight conference in the back room of the Inn of the Silver Eel, where Pulg first warmly praised and then coolly castigated the Gray Mouser.

He praised the Mouser for intercepting the Treasurer of Aarth, who it turned out *had* just been embarking on the black sloop, not to flee Lankhmar, though, but only to spend a water-guarded week end with several riotous companions and one Ilala, High Priestess of the goddess of the same name. However, he *had* actually taken along several of the black-pearl-crusted altar furnishings, apparently as a gift for the High Priestess, and the Mouser very properly confiscated them before wishing the holy band the most exquisite of pleasures on their holiday. Pulg judged that the Mouser's loot amounted to just about twice the usual cut, which seemed a reasonable figure to cover the Treasurer's irregularity.

He rebuked the Mouser for failing to warn the three bullies about Fafhrd and omitting to instruct them in detail on how to deal with the giant.

"They're your boys, son, and I judge you by their performance," Pulg told the Mouser in fatherly matter-of-fact tones. "To me, if they stumble, you flop. You know this Northerner well, son, you should have had them trained to meet his sleights. You solved your main problem well, but you slipped on an important detail. I expect good strategy from my lieutenants, but I demand flawless tactics."

The Mouser bowed his head.

"You and this Northerner were comrades once," Pulg continued. He leaned forward across the dinted table and drew down his lower lip. "You're not still soft on him, are you, son?"

The Mouser arched his eyebrows, flared his nostrils and slowly swung his face from side to side.

Pulg thoughtfully scratched his nose. "So we come to tomorrow night," he said. "Must make an example of Bwadres—an example that will stick like Mingol glue. I'd

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suggest having Grilli hamstring the Northerner at the first onset. Can't kill him—he's the one that brings in the money. But with ankle tendons cut he could still stump around on his hands and knees and be in some ways an even better drawing card. How's that sound to you?"

The Mouser slitted his eyes in thought for three breaths. Then, "Bad," he said boldly. "It gripes me to admit it, but this Northerner sometimes conjures up battle-sleights that even I can't be sure of countering — crazy berserk tricks born of sudden whim that no civilized man can anticipate. Chances are Grilli could nick him, but what if he didn't? Here's my reed—it lets you rightly think that I may still be soft on the man, but I give it because it's my best reed: let me get him drunk at nightfall. Dead drunk. Then he's out of the way for certain."

Pulg frowned. "Sure you can deliver on that, son? They say he's forsworn booze. And he sticks to Bwadres like a giant squid."

"I can detach him," the Mouser said. "And this way we don't risk spoiling him for Bwadres' show. Battle's always uncertain. You may plan to hock a man and then have to cut his throat."

Pulg shook his head. "We also leave him fit to tangle with our collectors the next time they come for the cash. Can't get him drunk every time we pick up the split. Too complicated. And looks very weak."

"No need to," the Mouser said confidently. "Once Bwadres starts paying, the Northerner will go along."

Pulg continued to shake his head. "You're guessing, son," he said. "Oh, to the best of your ability, but still guessing. I want this deal bagged up strongly. An example that will stick, I said. Remember, son, the man we're really putting on this show for tomorrow night is Bashabek. He'll be there, you can bet on it, though standing in the last row, I imagine—did you hear how your Northerner dumped two of his boys? I liked that." He grinned widely, then instantly grew serious again. "So we'll do it my way, eh? Grilli's very sure."

The Mouser shrugged once, deadpan. "If you say so. Of course, some Northerners suicide when crippled. I don't think *he* would, but he might. Still, even allowing for that, I'd say your plan has four

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chances in five of working out perfectly. Four in five."

Pulg frowned furiously, his rather piggy red-rimmed eyes fixed on the Mouser. Finally he said, "*Sure* you can get him drunk, son? Five in five?"

"I can do it," the Mouser said. He had thought of a half dozen additional arguments in favor of his plan, but he did not utter them. He did not even add, "Six in six," as he was tempted to. He was learning.

Pulg suddenly leaned back in his chair and laughed, signing that the business part of their conference was over. He tweaked the naked girl standing beside him. "Wine!" he ordered. "No, not that sugary slop I keep for customers—didn't Zizzi instruct you?—but the real stuff from behind the green idol. Come, son, pledge me a cup, and then tell me a little about this Issek. I'm interested in him. I'm interested in 'em all." He waved loosely at the darkly gleaming shelves of religious curios in the handsomely carved traveling case rising beyond the end of the table. He frowned a very different frown from his business one. "There are more things in this world than we understand," he said sententiously. "Did you know that, son?" The Great Man shook his head, again very differently. He was swiftly sinking into his most deeply metaphysical mood. "Makes me wonder, sometimes. You and I, son, know that these—" (He waved again at the case) "—are toys. But the feelings that men have toward them . . . they're real, eh?—and they can be strange. Easy to understand part of those feelings — brats shivering at bogies, fools gawking at a show and hoping for blood or a bit of undressing—but there's another part that's strange. The priests bray nonsense, the people groan and pray, and then *something* comes into existence. I don't know what that something is —I wish I did, I think—but it's strange." He shook his head. "Make any man wonder. So drink your wine, son—watch his cup, girl, and don't let it empty—and talk to me about Issek. I'm interested in 'em all, but right now I'd like to hear about him."

He did not in any way hint that for the past two months he had been watching the services of Issek for at least five nights a week from behind a veiled window in various lightless rooms along the

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Street of the Gods. It was certain that was something that not even the Mouser knew about Pulg.

So as a pinkly opalescent, rose-ribboned dawn surged up the sky from the black and stinking Marsh, the Mouser sought out Fafhrd. Bwadres was still snoring in the gutter, embracing Issek's cask, but the big barbarian was awake and sitting on the curb, hand grasping his chin under his beard. Already a few children had gathered at a respectful distance, though no one else was abroad.

"That the one they can't stab or cut?" the Mouser heard one of the children whisper.

"That's him," another answered.

"I'd like to sneak up behind him and stick him with this pin."

"I'll bet you would!"

"I guess he's got iron skin," said a tiny girl with large eyes.

The Mouser smothered a guffaw, patted that last child on the head, and then advanced straight to Fafhrd and, with a grimace at the stained refuse between the cobbles, squatted fastidiously on his hams. He still could do it easily though his new belly made a considerable pillow in his lap.

He said without preamble, speaking too low for the children to hear, "Some say the strength of Issek lies in love, some say in honesty, some say in courage, some say in stinking hypocrisy. I believe I have guessed the one true answer. If I am right, you will drink wine with me. If I am wrong, I will strip to my loincloth, declare Issek my god and master, and serve as acolyte's acolyte. Is it a wager?"

Fafhrd studied him. "It is done," he said.

The Mouser advanced his right hand and lightly rapped Fafhrd's body twice through the soiled camel's hair—once on the chest, once between the legs.

Each time there was a faint *thud* with just the hint of a *clank*.

"The cuirass of Mingsward and the groin-piece of Gortch," the Mouser pronounced. "Each heavily padded to keep them from ringing. Therein lie Issek's strength and invulnerability. They wouldn't have fit you six months ago."

Fafhrd sat as one bemused. Then his face broke into a large grin. "You win," he said. "When do I pay?"

"This very afternoon," the

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Mouser whispered, "when Bwadres eats and takes his forty winks." He rose with a light grunt and made off, stepping daintily from cobble to cobble.

Soon the Street of the Gods grew moderately busy and for a while Fafhrd was surrounded by a scattering of the curious, but it was a very hot day for Lankhmar. By mid-afternoon the Street was deserted, even the children had sought shade. Bwadres droned through the Acloyte's Litany twice with Fafhrd, then called for food by touching his hand to his mouth—it was his ascetic custom always to eat at this uncomfortable time rather than in the cool of the evening.

Fafhrd went off and shortly returned with a large bowl of fish stew. Bwadres blinked at the size of it, but tucked it away, belched, and curled around the cask after an admonition to Fafhrd. He was snoring almost immediately.

A hiss sounded from the low wide archway behind them. Fafhrd stood up and quietly moved into the shadows of the portico. The Mouser gripped his arm and guided him toward one of several curtained doorways.

"Your sweat's a flood, my friend," he said softly. "Tell me, do you really wear the armor from prudence, or is it a kind of metal hair-shirt?"

Fafhrd did not answer. He blinked at the curtain the Mouser drew aside. "I don't like this," he said. "It's a house of assignation. I may be seen and then what will dirty-minded people think?"

"Hung for the kid, hung for the goat," the Mouser said lightly. "Besides, you haven't been seen—yet. In with you!"

Fafhrd complied. The heavy curtains swung to behind them, leaving the room in which they stood lit only by high louvers. As Fafhrd squinted into the semi-darkness, the Mouser said, "I've paid the evening's rent on this place. It's private, it's near. None will know. What more could you ask?"

"I guess you're right," Fafhrd said uneasily. "But you've spent too much rent money. Understand, my little man, I can have only one drink with you. You tricked me into that—after a fashion you did—but I pay. But only one cup of wine, little man. We're friends, but we have our separate paths to tread. So only one cup. Or at most two."

"Naturally," purred the Mouser.

The objects in the room

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grew in the swimming gray blank of Fafhrd's vision. There was an inner door (also curtained), a narrow bed, a basin, a low table and stool, and on the floor beside the stool several portly short-necked large-eared shapes. Fafhrd counted them and once again his face broke into a large grin.

"Hung for a kid, you said," he rumbled softly in his old bass voice, continuing to eye the stone bottles of vintage. "I see four kids, Mouser."

The Mouser echoed himself. "Naturally."

By the time the candle the Mouser had fetched was guttering in a little pool Fafhrd was draining the third "kid." He held it upended above his head and caught the last drop, then batted it lightly away like a large feather-stuffed ball. As its shards exploded from the floor, he bent over from where he was sitting on the bed, bent so low that his beard brushed the floor, and clasped the last "kid" with both hands and lifted it with exaggerated care onto the table. Then taking up a very short-bladed knife and keeping his eyes so close to his work that they were inevitably crossed, he picked every last bit of resin out of the neck, flake by tiny flake.

Fafhrd no longer looked at all like an acolyte, even a misbehaving one. After finishing the first "kid" he had stripped for action. His camel's hair robe was flung into one corner of the room, the pieces of padded armor into another. Wearing only a once-white loincloth he looked like some lean doomful berserk, or a barbaric king in a bath-house.

For some time no light had been coming through the louvers. Now there was a little—the red glow of torches. The noises of night had started and were on the increase—thin laughter, hawkers' cries, various summonses to prayer . . . and Bwadres calling "Fafhrd!" again and again in his raspy long-carrying voice. But that last had stopped some time ago.

Fafhrd took so long with the resin, handling it like gold leaf, that the Mouser had to fight down several groans of impatience. But he was smiling his soft smile of victory. He did move once—to light a fresh taper from the expiring one. Fafhrd did not seem to notice the change in illumination. By now, it occurred to the Mouser, his friend was doubtless seeing everything by that brilliant light of spirits of wine which illum-

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ines the way of all brave drunkards.

Without any warning the Northerner lifted the short knife high and stabbed it into the center of the cork.

"Die, false Mingol!" he cried, withdrawing the knife with a twist, the cork on its point. "I drink your blood!" And he lifted the stone bottle to his lips.

After he had gulped about a third of its contents, by the Mouser's calculation, he set it down rather suddenly on the table. His eyeballs rolled upward, all the muscles of his body quivered with the passing of a beatific spasm, and he sank back majestically, like a tree that falls with care. The frail bed creaked ominously but did not collapse under its burden.

Yet this was not quite the end. An anxious crease appeared between Fafhrd's shaggy eyebrows, his head tilted up and his bloodshot eyes peered out menacingly from their eagle's nest of hair, searching the room.

Their gaze finally settled on the last stone bottle. A long rigidly-muscled arm shot out, a great hand shut on the top of the bottle and placed it under the edge of the bed and did not leave it. Then Fafhrd's eyes closed, his head dropped back with finality and, smiling, he began to snore.

The Mouser stood up and came over. He rolled back one of Fafhrd's eyelids, gave a satisfied nod, then gave another after feeling Fafhrd's pulse, which was surging with as slow and strong a rhythm as the breakers of the Outer Sea. Meanwhile the Mouser's other hand, operating with an habitual deftness and artistry unnecessary under the circumstances, abstracted from a fold in Fafhrd's loincloth a gleaming gold object he had earlier glimpsed there. He tucked it away in a secret pocket in the skirt of his gray tunic.

Someone coughed behind him.

It was such a deliberate-sounding cough that the Mouser did not leap or start, but only turned around without changing the planting of his feet in a movement slow and sinuous as that of a ceremonial dancer in the Temple of the Snake.

Pulg was standing in the inner doorway, wearing the black-and-silver striped robe and cowl of a masker and holding a black, jewel-spangled vizard a little aside from his face. He was looking at the Mouser enigmatically.

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"I didn't think you could do it, son, but you did," he said softly. "You patch your credit with me at a wise time. Ho, Wiggin, Quatch! Ho. Grilli!"

The three henchmen glided into the room behind Pulg, all garbed in garments as somberly gay as their master's. The first two were stocky men, but the third was slim as a weasel and shorter than the Mouser, at whom he glared with guarded and rivalrous venom. The first two were armed with small crossbows and shortswords, but the third had no weapon in view.

"You have the cords, Quatch?" Pulg continued. He pointed at Fafhrd. "Then bind me this man to the bed. See that you secure well his brawny arms."

"He's safer unbound," the Mouser started to say, but Pulg cut in on him with, "Easy, son. You're still running this job, but I'm going to be looking over your shoulder, yes and I'm going to be revising your plan as you go along, changing any detail I choose. Good training for you. Any competent lieutenant should be able to operate under the eyes of his general, yes even when other subordinates are listening in on the reprimands. We'll call it a test."

The Mouser was alarmed and puzzled. There was something about Pulg's behavior that he did not at all understand. Something discordant, as if a secret struggle were going on inside the master extortioner. He was not obviously drunk, yet his piggy eyes had a strange gleam. He almost seemed fey.

"How have I forfeited your trust?" the Mouser asked sharply.

Pulg grinned skewily. "Son, I'm ashamed of you," he said. "High Priestess Ilala told me the *full* story of the black sloop—how you sublet it from the treasurer in return for allowing him to keep the pearl tiara and stomacher. How you had Ourph the deafmute Mingol sail it to another dock. Ilala got mad at the treasurer because he went cold on her or scared and wouldn't give her the black gewgaws. That's why she came to me. To cap it, your Lilyblack spilled the same story to Grilli here, whom she favors. Well, son?"

The Mouser folded his arms and threw back his head. "You said yourself the split was sufficient," he told Pulg. "We can always use another sloop."

Pulg laughed low and rather long. "Don't get me wrong,

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son," he said at last. "I *like* my lieutenants to be the sort of men who'd want a bolt-hole handy — I'd suspect their brains if they didn't. I *want* them to be the sort of men who worry a lot about their precious skins, but only after worrying about *my* hide first! Don't fret, son. We'll get along—I think. Quatch! Is he bound yet?"

The two burlier henchmen, who had hooked their crossbows to their belts, were well along with their job. Tight loops of rope at chest, waist and knees bound Fafhrd to the bed, while his wrists had been drawn up level with the top of his head and tightly laced to the sides of the bed. Fafhrd still snored peacefully on his back. He had stirred a little and groaned when his hand had been drawn away from the bottle under the bed, but that was all. Wiggin was preparing to bind the Northerner's ankles, but Pulg signed it was enough.

"Grilli!" Pulg called. "Your razor!"

The weasel-like henchman seemed merely to wave his hand past his chest and—lo! —there was a gleaming square-headed blade in it. He smiled as he moved toward Fafhrd's naked ankles. He caressed the thick tendons under them and looked pleadingly at Pulg.

Pulg was watching the Mouser narrowly.

The Mouser felt an unbearable tension stiffening him. He must do something! He raised the back of his hand to his mouth and yawned.

Pulg pointed at Fafhrd's other end. "Grilli," he repeated, "shave me this man! Debeard and demane him! Shave him like an egg!" Then he leaned toward the Mouser and said in a sort of slack-mouthed confidential way, "I've heard of these barbs that it draws their strength. Think you so? No matter, we'll see."

Slashing off a lusty man's head-and-face hair and then shaving him close takes considerable time, even when the barber is as shudderingly swift as Grilli and as heedless of the dim and flickering light. Time enough for the Mouser to assess the situation seventeen different ways and still not find its ultimate key. One thing shone through from every angle: the irrationality of Pulg's behavior. Spilling secrets . . . accusing a lieutenant in front of henchmen . . . proposing an idiot "test" . . . wearing grotesque holiday clothes . . . binding a

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man dead drunk . . . and now this superstitious nonsense of shaving Fafhrd—why, it was as if Pulg were fey indeed and performing some eerie ritual under the demented guise of shrewd tactics.

And there was one thing the Mouser was certain of: that when Pulg got through being fey or drugged or whatever it was, he would never again trust any of the men who had been through the experience with him, including—most particularly!—the Mouser. It was a sad conclusion—to admit that his hard-bought security was now worthless—yet it was a realistic one and the Mouser perforce came to it. So even while he continued to puzzle, the small man in gray congratulated himself on having bargained himself so disastrously into possession of the black sloop. A bolt-hole might soon be handy indeed, and he doubted whether Pulg had discovered where Ourph had concealed the craft. Meanwhile he must expect treachery from Pulg at any step and death from Pulg's henchmen at their master's unpredictable whim. So the Mouser decided that the less *they* (Grilli in particular) were in a position to do the Mouser or anyone else damage, the better.

Pulg was laughing again. "Why, he looks like a new-hatched babe!" the master extortioner exclaimed. "Good work, Grilli!"

Fafhrd did indeed look startlingly youthful without any hair above that on his chest, and in a way far more like what most people think an acolyte should look. He might even have appeared romantically handsome except that Grilli, in perhaps an excess of zeal, had also shorn naked his eyebrows—which had the effect of making Fafhrd's head, very pale under the vanished hair, seem like a marble bust set atop a living body.

Pulg continued to chuckle. "And no spot of blood—no, not one! That is the best of omens! Grilli, I love you!"

That was true enough too—in spite of his demonic speed, Grilli had not once nicked Fafhrd's face or head. Doubtless a man thwarted of the opportunity to hamstring another would scorn any lesser cutting—indeed, consider it a blot on his own character. Or so the Mouser guessed.

Gazing at his shorn friend, the Mouser felt almost inclined to laugh himself. Yet this impulse—and along with it

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his lively fear for his own and Fafhrd's safety—was momentarily swallowed up in the feeling that something about this whole business was very *wrong*—wrong not only by any ordinary standards, but also in a deeply occult sense. This stripping of Fafhrd, this shaving of him, this binding of him to the ricketty narrow bed . . . wrong, wrong wrong! Once again it occurred to him, more strongly this time, that Pulg was unknowingly performing an eldritch ritual.

"Hist!" Pulg cried, raising a finger. The Mouser obediently listened along with the three henchmen and their master. The ordinary noises outside had diminished, for a moment almost ceased. Then through the curtained doorway and the red-lit louvers came the raspy high voice of Bwadres beginning the Long Litany and the mumbling sigh of the crowd's response.

Pulg clapped the Mouser hard on the shoulder. "He is about it! 'Tiz time!" he cried. "Command us! We will see, son, how well you have planned. Remember, I will be watching over your shoulder and that it is my desire that you strike at the end of Bwadres' sermon when the collection is taken." He frowned at Grilli, Wiggin and Quatch. "Obey this my lieutenant!" he warned sternly. "Jump at his least command!—save when I countermand. Come on, son, hurry it up, start giving orders!"

The Mouser would have liked to punch Pulg in the middle of the jeweled vizard which the extortioner was just now again lifting to his face—punch his fat nose and fly this madhouse of commanded commandings. But there was Fafhrd to be considered — stripped, shaved, bound, dead drunk, immeasurably helpless. The Mouser contented himself with starting through the outer door and motioning the henchmen and Pulg too to follow him. Hardly to his surprise—for it was difficult to decide *what* behavior would have been surprising under the circumstances—they obeyed him.

He signed Grilli to hold the curtain aside for the others. Glancing back over the smaller man's shoulder he saw Quatch, last to leave, dip to blow out the taper and under cover of that movement snag the two-thirds full bottle of wine from under the edge of the bed and lug it along with him. And for some reason that innocently thievish act struck the Mouser as being

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the most occultly wrong thing of all the supernally off-key events that had been occurring recently. He wished there were some god in whom he had real trust so that he could pray to him for enlightenment and guidance in the ocean of inexplicably strange intuitions engulfing him. But unfortunately for the Mouser there was no such divinity. So there was nothing for it but to plunge all by himself into that strange ocean and take his chances—do without calculation whatever the inspiration of the moment moved him to do.

So while Bwadres keened and rasped through the Long Litany against the sighing responses of the crowd (and an uncommonly large number of cat-calls and boos), the Mouser was very busy indeed, helping prepare the setting and place the characters for a drama of which he did not know more than scraps of the plot. The many shadows were his friends in this—he could slip almost invisibly from one shielding darkness to another —and he had the trays of half the hawkers in Lankhmar as a source of stage properties.

Among other things, he insisted on personally inspecting the weapons of Quatch and Wiggin—the shortswords and their sheaths, the small crossbows and the quivers of tiny quarrels that were their ammunition — most wicked-looking short arrows. By the time the Long Litany had reached its wailing conclusion, the stage was set, though exactly when and where and how the curtain would rise—and who would be the audience and who the players—remained uncertain.

At all events it was an impressive scene: the long Street of the Gods stretching off toward a colorful torchlit dolls' world of distance in either direction, low clouds racing overhead, faint ribbons of mist gliding in from the Great Salt Marsh, the rumble of far distant thunder, bleat and growl of priests of gods other than Issek, squealing laughter of women and children, leather-lunged calling of hawkers and newsslaves, odor of incense curling from temples mingling with the oily aroma of fried foods on hawkers' trays, the reek of smoking torches, and the musk and flower smells of gaudy ladies.

Issek's audience, augmented by the many drawn by the tale of last night's doings of the demon acolyte and the wild predictions of Bwadres,

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blocked the Street from curb to curb, leaving only difficult gangway through the roofed porticos to either side. All levels of Lankhmarian society were represented—rags and ermine, bare feet and jeweled sandals, mercenaries' steel and philosophers' wands, faces painted with rare cosmetics and faces powdered only with dust, eyes of hunger, eyes of satiety, eyes of mad belief and eyes of a skepticism that hid fear.

Bwadres, panting a little after the Long Litany, stood on the curb across the Street from the low archway of the house where the drunken Fafhrd slept bound. His shaking hand rested on the cask that, draped now with the garlic bag, was both Issek's coffer and altar. Crowded so close as to leave him almost no striding space were the inner circles of the congregation —devotees sitting cross-legged, crouched on knees, or squatting on hams.

The Mouser had stationed Wiggin and Quatch by an overset fishmonger's cart in the center of the Street. They passed back and forth the stone bottle Quatch had snared, doubtless in part to make their odorous post more bearable, though every time the Mouser noted their bibbing he had a return of the feeling of occult wrongness.

Pulg had picked for his post a side of the low archway in front of Fafhrd's house, to call it that. He kept Grilli beside him, while the Mouser crouched nearby after his preparations were complete. Pulg's jeweled mask was hardly exceptional in the setting; several women were vizarded and a few of the other men—colorful blank spots in the sea of faces.

It was certainly not a calm sea. Not a few of the audience seemed greatly annoyed at the absence of the giant acolyte (and had been responsible for the boos and cat-calls during the Litany). While even the regulars missed the acolyte's lute and his sweet tenor tale-telling and were exchanging anxious questions and speculations. All it took was someone to shout, "Where's the acolyte?" and in a few moments half the audience was chanting, "We want the acolyte! We want the acolyte!"

Bwadres silenced them by looking earnestly up the Street with shaded eyes, pretending he saw one coming, and then suddenly pointing dramatically in that direction, as if to signal the approach

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of the man for whom they were calling. While the crowd craned their necks and shoved about, trying to see what Bwadres was pretending to—and incidentally left off chanting—the ancient priest launched into his sermon.

"I will tell you what has happened to my acolyte!" he cried. "Lankhmar has swallowed him, Lankhmar has gobbled him up—Lankhmar the evil city, the city of drunkenness and lechery and all corruption — Lankhmar, the city of the stinking black bones!"

This last blasphemous reference to the gods *of* Lankhmar (whom it can be death to mention, though the gods *in* Lankhmar may be insulted without limit) further shocked the crowd into silence.

Bwadres raised his hands and face to the low racing clouds.

"Oh, Issek, compassionate mighty Issek, pity thy humble servitor who now stands friendless and alone. I had one acolyte, strong in thy defense, but they took him from me. You told him, Issek, much of your life and your secrets, he had ears to hear it and lips to sing it, but now the black devils have got him! Oh, Issek, have pity!"

Bwadres spread his hands toward the mob and looked them around.

"Issek was a young god when he walked the earth, a young god speaking only of love, yet they bound him to the rack of torture. He brought Waters of Peace for all in his Holy Jug, but they broke it." And here Bwadres described at great length and with far more vividness than his usual wont (perhaps he felt he had to make up for the absence of his skald-turned-acolyte) the life and especially the torments and death of Issek of the Jug, until there was hardly one among the listeners who did not have vividly in mind the vision of Issek on his rack (succession of racks, rather) and who did not feel at least sympathetic twinges in his joints at the thought of the god's suffering.

Women and strong men wept unashamedly, beggars and scullions howled, philosophers covered their ears.

Bwadres wailed on toward a shuddering climax. "As you yielded up your precious ghost on the eighth rack, oh, Issek, as your broken hands fashioned even your torturer's collar into a Jug of surpassing beauty, you thought only of us, oh, Holy Youth. You thought only of making

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beautiful the lives of the most tormented and deformed of us, thy miserable slaves."

At those words Pulg took several staggering steps forward from the side of the archway, dragging Grilli with him, and dropped to his knees on the filthy cobbles. His black-and-silver striped cowl fell back on his shoulders and his jeweled black vizard slipped from his face, which was thus revealed as unashamedly coursing with tears.

"I renounce all other gods," the boss extortioner gasped between sobs. "Hereafter I serve only gentle Issek of the Jug."

The weasley Grilli, crouching contortedly in his efforts to avoid being smirched by the nasty pavement, gazed at his master as at one demented, yet could not or still dared not break Pulg's hold on his wrist.

Pulg's action attracted no particular attention—conversions were a smerduk a score at the moment — but the Mouser took note of it, especially since Pulg's advance had brought him so close that the Mouser could have reached out and patted Pulg's bald pate. The small man in gray felt a certain satisfaction or rather relief—if Pulg had for some time been a secret Issek-worshipper, then his feyness might be explained. At the same time a gust of emotion akin to pity went through him. Looking down at his left hand the Mouser discovered that he had taken out of its secret pocket the gold bauble he had filched from Fafhrd. He was tempted to put it softly in Pulg's palm. How fitting, how soul-shaking, how *nice* it would be, he thought, if at the moment the floodgates of religious emotion burst in him, Pulg were to receive this truly beautiful memento of the god of his choice. But gold is gold, and a black sloop requires as much upkeep as any other color yacht, so the Mouser resisted the temptation.

Bwadres threw wide his hands and continued, "With dry throats, oh, Issek, we thirst for thy Waters. With gullets burning and cracked, thy slaves beg for a single sip from thy Jug. We would ransom our souls for one drop of it to cool us in this evil city, damned by black bones. Oh, Issek, descend to us! Bring us! Bring us thy Waters of Peace! We need you, we want you. Oh, Issek, come!"

Such was the power and yearning in that last appeal that the whole crowd of kneel-

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ing worshippers gradually took it up, chanting with all reverence, louder and louder, in an unendingly repeated, self-hypnotizing response: "We want Issek! We want Issek!"

It was that mighty rhythmic shouting which finally penetrated to the small conscious core of Fafhrd's wine-deadened brain where he lay drunk in the dark, though Bwadres' remarks about dry throats and burning gullets and healing drops and sips may have opened the way. At any rate, Fafhrd came suddenly and shudderingly awake with the one thought in his mind: another drink—and the one sure memory: that there was some wine left.

It disturbed him a little that his hand was not still on the stone bottle under the edge of the bed, but for some dubious reason up near his ear.

He reached for the bottle and was outraged to find that he could not move his arm. Something or someone was holding it.

Wasting no time on petty measures, the large barbarian rolled his whole body over mightily, with the idea of at once wrenching free from whatever was holding him and getting under the bed where the wine was.

He succeeded in tipping the bed on its side and himself with it. But *that* didn't bother him, it didn't shake up his numb body at all. What *did* bother him was that he couldn't sense any wine nearby—smell it, see it squintily, bump his head into it . . . certainly not the quart or more he remembered having safeguarded for just such an emergency as this.

At about the same time he became dimly aware that he was somehow *attached* to whatever he'd been sleeping on—especially his wrists and shoulders and chest.

However his legs seemed reasonably free, though somewhat hampered at the knees, and since the bed happened to have fallen partly on the low table and with its head braced against the wall, the blind twist-and-heave he gave now actually brought him to his feet and the bed with him.

He squinted around. The curtained outer doorway was an oblong of lesser darkness. He immediately headed for it. The bed foiled his first efforts to get through, bringing him up short in a most exasperating manner, but by ducking and by turning edgewise he finally managed it, pushing the curtain ahead of him with his face. He wondered mud-

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dily if he were paralyzed, the wine he'd drunk all gone into his arms, or if some warlock had put a spell on him. It was certainly degrading to have to go about with ones wrists up about ones ears. Also, his head and cheeks and chin felt unaccountably chilly—possibly another evidence of black magic.

The curtain dragged off of his head finally and he saw ahead of him a rather low archway and—vaguely and without being at all impressed by them—crowds of people kneeling and swaying.

Ducking down again, he lumbered through the archway and straightened up. Torchlight almost blinded him. He stopped and stood there blinking. After a bit his vision cleared a little and the first person he saw that meant anything to him was the Gray Mouser.

He remembered now that the last person he had been drinking with was the Mouser. By the same token—in this matter Fafhrd's maggoty mind worked very fast indeed—the Mouser must be the person who had made away with his quart or more of midnight medicine. A great righteous anger flamed in him and he took a very deep breath.

So much for Fafhrd and what *he* saw.

What the *crowd* saw—the god - intoxicated, chanting, weeping crowd—was very different indeed.

They saw a man of divine stature strapped with hands high to a framework of some sort. A mightily muscled man, naked save for a loincloth, with a shorn head and face that, marble white, looked startlingly youthful. Yet with the expression on that marble face of one who is being tortured.

And if anything else were needed (truly, it hardly was) to convince them that here was the god, the divine Issek, they had summoned with their passionately insistent cries, then it was supplied when that nearly seven-foot-tall apparition called out in a deep voice of thunder:

"Where is the jug? WHERE IS THE JUG?"

The few people in the crowd who were still standing dropped instantly to their knees at that point or prostrated themselves. Those kneeling in the opposite direction switched around like startled crabs. Two score persons, including Bwadres, fainted, and of these the hearts of five stopped beating forever. At least a

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dozen individuals went permanently mad, though at the moment they seemed no different from the rest—including (among the twelve) seven philosophers and a niece of Lankhmar's High Overlord. As one, the members of the mob abased themselves in terror and ecstacy—groveling, writhing, beating breasts or temples, clapping hands to eyes and peering fearfully through hardly parted fingers as if at an unbearably bright light.

It may be objected that at least a few of the mob should have recognized the figure before them as that of Bwadres' giant acolyte. After all, the height was right. But consider the differences: The acolyte was full-bearded and shaggy-maned; the apparition was beardless and bald—and strangely so, lacking even eyebrows. The acolyte had always gone robed; the apparition was nearly naked. The acolyte had always used a sweetly high voice; the apparition roared harshly in a voice almost two octaves lower.

Finally, the apparition was bound—to a torture rack, surely—and calling in the voice of one being tortured for his Jug.

As one, the members of the mob abased themselves.

With the exception of the Gray Mouser, Grilli, Wiggin, and Quatch. They knew well enough who faced them. (Pulg knew too, of course, but he, most subtle-brained in some ways and now firmly converted to Issekianity, merely assumed that Issek had chosen to manifest himself in the body of Fafhrd and that he, Pulg, had been divinely guided to prepare that body for the purpose. He humbly swelled with the full realization of the importance of his own position in the scheme of Issek's reincarnation.)

His three henchmen, however, were quite untouched by religious emotions. Grilli for the moment could do nothing as Pulg was still holding his wrist in a grip of fervid strength.

But Wiggin and Quatch were free. Although somewhat dull-brained and little used to acting on their own initiative, they were not long in realizing that the giant had appeared who was supposed to be kept out of the way so that he would not queer the game of their strangely-behaving master and his tricky gray-clad lieutenant. Moreover, they well knew what jug Fafhrd was shouting for so

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angrily, and since they also knew they had stolen and drunken it empty, they likely also were moved by guilty fears that Fafhrd might soon see them, break loose, and visit vengeance upon them.

They cranked up their crossbows with furious haste, slapped in quarrels, knelt, aimed, and discharged the bolts straight at Fafhrd's naked chest. Several persons in the mob noted their action and shrieked at its wickedness.

The two bolts struck Fafhrd's chest, bounced off, and dropped to the cobbles—quite naturally enough, as they were two of the fowling quarrels (headed merely with little knobs of wood and used for knocking down small birds) with which the Mouser had topped off their quivers.

The crowd gasped at Issek's invulnerability and cried for joy and amazement.

However, although fowling quarrels will hardly break a man's skin, even when discharged at close range, they nevertheless sting mightily even the rather numb body of a man who has recently drunk numerous quarts of wine. Fafhrd roared in agony, punched out his arms convulsively, *and broke the framework to which he was attached.*

The crowd cheered hysterically at this further proper action in the drama of Issek which his acolyte had so often chanted.

Quatch and Wiggin, realizing that their missile weapons had somehow been rendered innocuous, but too dull-witted or wine-fuddled to see anything either occult or suspicious in the manner of that rendering, grabbed at their shortswords and rushed forward at Fafhrd to cut him down before he could finish detaching himself from the fragments of the broken bed —which he was now trying to do in a puzzled way.

Yes, Quatch and Wiggin rushed forward, but almost immediately came to a halt—in the very strange posture of men who are trying to lift themselves into the air by heaving at their own belts.

The shortswords would not come out of their scabbards. Mingol glue is indeed a powerful adhesive and the Mouser had been most determined that, however little else he accomplished, Pulg's henchmen should be put in a position where they could harm no one.

However, he had been able to do nothing in the way of

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pulling Grilli's fangs, as the tiny man was most sharp-witted himself and Pulg had kept him closely at his side. Now almost foaming at the mouth in vulpine rage and disgust, Grilli broke loose from his god-besotted master, whisked out his razor, and sprang at Fafhrd, who at last had clearly realized what was encumbering him and was having a fine time breaking the last pesky fragments of the bed over his knee or by the leverage of foot against cobble—to the accompaniment of the continuing wild cheers of the mob.

But the Mouser sprang rather more swiftly. Grilli saw him coming, shifted his attack to the gray-clad man, feinted twice and loosed one slash that narrowly missed. Thereafter he lost blood too quickly to be interested in attempting any further fencing. Cat's Claw is narrow and slightly curved but it cuts throats as well as any other dagger (though it does not have a barbed tip, as some literal-minded scholars have claimed).

The bout with Grilli left the Mouser standing very close to Fafhrd. The little man realized he still held in his left hand the golden representation of the Jug fashioned by Fafhrd, and that object now touched off in the Mouser's mind a series of inspirations leading to actions that followed one another very much like the successive figures of a dance.

He slapped Fafhrd backhanded on the cheek to attract the giant's attention. Then he sprang to Pulg, sweeping his left hand in a dramatic arc as if conveying something from the naked god to the extortioner, and lightly placed the golden bauble in the supplicating fingers of the latter. (One of those times had come when all ordinary scales of value fail—even for the Mouser—and gold is—however briefly—of no worth.) Recognizing the holy object, Pulg almost expired in ecstacy.

But the Mouser had already skipped on across the Street. Reaching Issek's coffer-altar, beside which Bwadres was stretched unconscious but smiling, he twitched off the garlic bag and sprang upon the small cask and danced upon it, hooting to further attract Fafhrd's attention and then pointing at his own feet.

Fafhrd saw the cask, all right, as the Mouser had intended he should, and the giant did not see it as anything to do with Issek's col-

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lections (the thought of all such matters was still wiped from his mind) but simply as a likely source of the liquor he craved. With a glad cry he hastened toward it across the Street, his worshippers scuttling out of his way or moaning in beatific ecstacy when he trod on them with his naked feet. He caught up the cask and lifted it to his lips.

To the crowd it seemed that Issek was drinking his own coffer—an unusual yet undeniably picturesque way for a god to absorb his worshippers' cash offerings.

With a roar of baffled disgust Fafhrd raised the cask to smash it on the cobbles, whether from pure frustration or with some idea of getting at the liquor he thought it held is hard to say, but just then the Mouser caught his attention again. The small man had snatched two tankards of ale from an abandoned tray and was pouring the heady liquid back and forth between them until the high-piled foam trailed down the sides.

Tucking the cask under his left arm—for many drunkards have a curious prudent habit of absent - mindedly hanging onto things, especially if they may contain liquor—Fafhrd set out again after the Mouser, who ducked into the darkness of the nearest portico and then danced out again and led Fafhrd in a great circle all the way around the roiling congregation.

Literally viewed it was hardly an edifying spectacle—a large god stumbling after a small gray demon and grasping at a tankard of beer that just kept eluding him—but the Lankhmarians were already viewing it under the guise of two dozen different allegories and symbolisms, several of which were later written up in learned scrolls.

The second time through the portico Issek and the small gray demon did not come out again. A large chorus of mixed voices kept up expectant and fearful cries for some time, but the two supernatural beings did not reappear.

Turning back to a dawn exactly three years earlier we find the Gray Mouser and Fafhrd clambering from a cranky leaky skiff into the cockpit of a black sloop moored beyond the Great Mole that juts out from Lankhmar and the east bank of the River Hlal into the Inner Sea. Before coming aboard, Fafhrd first handed up Issek's cask to

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the impassively sallow-faced Ourph. Then all three bent to the task of upping anchor and making sail.

As soon as the salty wind was driving them directly away from the land and Lankhmar, the Mouser turned quickly to Issek's cask and its loot. In the dusk his fingers could not find a coin-slit. When he upended the heavy object it did not even jingle. Eager to open it before Fafhrd could protest, the Mouser raised a heavy hatchet he had taken from the sloop's tool rack and bashed in a section of wood.

There was a spray of stingingly aromatic fluid of most familiar odor. Brandy . . . to the absolute top so it had not gurgled. And then, as the day grew brighter, the Mouser noticed a somewhat burnt inscription on one end of the cask: "Dear Pulg—Drown your sorrows in this—Bashabek."

In thinking back it was only too easy to realize how yesterday afternoon the Number Two Extortioner had had a perfect opportunity to effect the substitution.

Then, for the first time in many months, Fafhrd and the Mouser really looked at each other. There was an odd shyness in both their gazes—each had the sudden thought that he had taken his friend away from the lifepath he had chosen in Lankhmar, perhaps the life-path best suited to his treading.

The Mouser laughed a little self-consciously. "I have no regrets for Lankhmar," he said, lying mightily, though not entirely. "I can see now that if I'd stayed I'd have gone the way of Pulg and all such Great Men—fat, power-racked, lieutenant-plagued, smothered with false-hearted dancing girls, and falling at last into the arms of religion. At least I'm saved that last chronic ailment, which is worse than the dropsy." He looked at Fafhrd narrowly. "But how of you, old friend? Will you miss Bwadres and your cobbled bed and your nightly tale-weaving?"

Fafhrd frowned as the sloop plunged on northward and the salt spray dashed him.

"Not I," he said at last. "There are always other tales to be woven. I served a god well, I dressed him in new clothes, and then I did a third thing. Who'd go back to being an acolyte after being so much more? You see, old friend, I really *was* Issek."

The Mouser arched his eyebrows. "You were?"

Fafhrd nodded twice, most gravely. **THE END**

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THE REWARD

They all made fun of Geller and his Folly . . . except the slim blonde girl . . . and a faceless entity called Chance.

AND here behind this dingy door, Miss Silvers— Well, Diana then— All right, Di! (I am unused to addressing lovely young ladies familiarly, in fact I am unused to lovely young ladies, they rarely register for my courses—even the elementary survey—and you are the first who ever did me the very great honor of coming back afterwards to pay me a visit, an evening visit indeed.) Well, behind this unimpressive door, Di, the least impressive in the whole science building, is Geller's Folly, the last whimsical fling of a professor emeritus, the ridiculous project

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that makes it crystal clear that I am not one of the infinitely competent new nuclear men, but a physicist of the Cavendish breed—a half-mad hobbyist. Yes, that is a typewriter of sorts you hear behind the door—it is part of the Folly. The typist seems to think a lot between bursts, does he not?

Bother, I have left my key at home. We will pass up the Folly, Di. Without regrets. You will remember it better as a trivial mystery, an old man's flaunting boast in a dimly lit corridor, than in its shrunken dull reality.

You really would like to see the Folly? It does have a certain robot fascination. Well, I suppose we can get Olafson's key. He lives in the machine shop except for a brief respite after midnight—and it lacks three hours of that. With your permission, Di, we will descend to Olafson's Hole. This way. Your furs and silks will make a brave shine in his dismal smithy where, a wide-cheeked Alberich, he fashions our brass and steel traps for the molecule. Olafson is a physicist's machinist of the old breed, a dogged perfectionist such as Babbage depended on for building his ill-starred difference machine. Our Swedish Vulcan will be delighted by your presence and perhaps inwardly flustered—I imagine he is as unused to lovely young ladies as I.

But there is one thing that not even you will be able to elicit from Olafson—a smile. Olafson may conceivably have smiled as a baby, but there is no record of it, and he certainly has never smiled since. He is the very embodiment of sullen materialism, an aggregation of solidly packed molecules in which there is no room for the nonsense of spirit. I must confess that I like him that way, for I am a materialist myself, a devoted monist and atheist—I trust I do not shock you. I do not well understand the new young men in my field, who listen to Bach and Bruckner and Bartok, read Kierkegaard and Niebuhr and Dostoyevsky, have themselves psychoanalyzed, and eventually become Unitarians or High Episcopalians. I stand by Haeckel and Haldane, I know that the universe is a meaningless swirl of atoms, though from time to time I have whimsical fancies.

The Folly? Yes, perhaps it is best that I describe it to you now. Then we need steal only a quick glimpse of the actuality, which may leave it a shred of glamor. Besides, it

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will pass the time—as you see, Olafson's Hole is a deep one and the way to it is long.

The Folly is a tiny hermetically sealed chamber filled with air under the constant pressure of one atmosphere. Every five seconds a knife-edged wall descends swiftly through its midst, cutting it into two chambers. In each of these two chambers the pressure of the air is automatically measured with an accuracy of five figures. Then the dividing wall flies up, the Folly becomes one chamber again, and the process is repeated. With Olafson's help I try to keep it operating 24 hours a day. There are occasional breakdowns, but we have had it slashing air and measuring pressure continuously for periods as long as 15 months. It is in its seventh month this time.

Somewhere in my pockets I should have a section of the record it taps out like a veritable stock ticker—I have compromised enough with modern methods to let one of the young men hook on a typewriting device that commits the air pressure measurements to a paper tape. Here it is! See, the left-hand column records the pressures in Chamber A and the right hand column the pressures that simultaneously exist in Chamber B—taking the pressure inside the Folly as unity.

1.00000	.99999
.99999	.99999
1.00000	1.00000
1.00000	1.00000
1.00001	.99999

As you can plainly see, the readings do not differ by more than two ten-thousandths—the Folly's permissable margin of error in measurement. I have yards and yards of such figures, all showing the same boresome invariability. Once I spotted a reading of .99997 and my heart skipped a beat, but the reading was the same in the other chamber—the Folly had merely sprung a slow leak and the air pressure outside was lower.

Well may you ask, Di, even though you did audit the elementary survey . . . you know, I really should remember you, I should remember such a lovely young lady. I am growing old, I fear, and my memory has become an ungallant traitor, while you are exceptionally young to be bothering about alumni reunions and calls on old profs . . . Well may you ask, Di, why I should expect the air pressure in the two chambers ever to differ, why I should have Olafson

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build a machine that goes through such a trivial rigmarole, why in short I should spend my declining years dancing attendance on monotony. The answer is that I am trying to trap Maxwell's demon. Here is Olafson's Hole.

Who is he? Why, as I told you, he is our machinist—Oh, Maxwell's demon. Well, *he* might be described as the element of the fantastic in the cosmos—the element of the possbile but wildly improbable.

Bother, Olafson has gone off on some errand. He had locked up and hung his "Back in 20 minutes" sign on the door. I fear the Fates are against us, Di, tonight. They do not wish you to see Geller's Folly, and be disillusioned. I am sure of course that they are wiser than we.

You still wish to see it? You are most flattering to an old man. Well, we can confidently wait for Olafson—his 20 minutes never means 21, nor—oddly—19. Better, we'll take a turn around the quadrangle—it is a mild night for January and you have your furs, while I will simply button the cardigan I wear in winter beneath my suit coat. Allow me a moment to scribble a note to Olafson so that he does not go off again. Better, I'll tell him to meet us at the Folly.

How do I expect to trap Max—I mean the fantastic in the Folly? Well . . . You are sure I am not boring you? Yes, I agree that if you wish to see the Folly, it is likely that you wish to understand it. Thank you. Well, in the Folly I have a double handful of air—billions of molecules of several gasses, each moving at thousands of feet a second, endlessly colliding, rebounding from each other and the walls of the Folly hundreds of times a second, a shuffled jumble of particles. The energy of movement of these molecules, of course, adds up to the air pressure—I fear I grow stuffy, Di.

Science does not allow me to predict the behavior of any one of the molecules — as Whitehead puts it, the individual particle is a rare bird—but I am able to make significant predictions about the behavior of the flock. For instance, I can say that at any given moment the chances are overwhelming (I will not trouble you with the figures) that half the molecules are moving predominantly westward and half eastward—and the same for north and south and up and down.

But that, mark you, is only the overwhelming probability.

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It is conceivable, though vastly improbable, that at some given instant, all the molecules (or, more modestly, significantly more than fifty percent) might be moving west. It is a little like the chance of getting thirteen hearts at bridge or a "pat" royal flush at poker—though of course vastly more unlikely than that. The point is that the possibility, however remote, is a real one.

You see, Di, miracles are possible though we might have to wait more than the lifetimes of a thousand universes to see one. Yet, the miracle might come this moment, conceivably. You might unpin that charming half-moon silver brooch at your throat and hold it out, and if all the molecules immediately beneath it chanced to be moving upward at that instant, it would be struck from your hand high into the air! Or across the corridor into my hand, if that chanced to be the whim of the molecule flock. (Here, incidentally, is where Maxwell's demon comes in. The British physicist Clerk Maxwell, simply to illustrate a point about the Second Law of Thermodynamics, hypothesized an invisible spirit with the ability to direct the motion of individual particles.)

Similarly, at some instant all the molecules in the Folly might chance to be in Chamber A when the knife edge comes down. In that case, we would surely know it, for the pressure reading would be twice unity—two—in Chamber A and zero—a vacuum—in Chamber B.

Naturally, I am not looking for any such horrendously spectacular result. The most I hope for is a reading that shows a barely significant difference. Even at that I am like a roulette player waiting for black to turn up a hundred times running (really a million or a billion times), I am like a bridge player hoping to be dealt thirteen hearts in every hand for, say, three weeks of play.

I am like a gambler tirelessly casting a billion billion dice —the Folly my box—in the hope of one day throwing a billion billion sixes. Note, Di, that I try not to change dice, I try to shake the same molecules each time—that is why the Folly is hermetically sealed. I don't imagine that like an old deck of cards the molecules will develop markings with use and become "readers"—though that is an attractive notion—but I coddle in my mind the ridiculous

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fancy that the same molecular flock, cooped up so long in the Folly, will eventually become bored and frantic and panicky (part of my mind thinks like a pagan infant's) and in their desperation begin to behave irregularly. Some men have suggested that light ages in its passage through space, you know, so why might not molecules go mad from long imprisonment?

I jest, yet from all this you can understand, Di, why younger, sounder, more professional physicists would laugh or shake their heads if I told them of Geller's Folly. I am waiting, on my knees as it were, for an improbability that is for all human purposes an impossibility. To them I must present a ridiculous spectacle. But those younger men, with their easier, more sophisticated, eclectic philosophies, do not comprehend the deep passions of a devoted materialist like myself. Scorning the lie of spirit, believing only in matter, in molecules and other particles, I have a far more fierce and patient desire than they do to understand all that matter is capable of, to know matters' rare and whimsical as well as its everyday behavior. When one of the younger men embraces the Christian faith, especially in its Catholic form, I am tempted to suggest: (again I trust I do not shock you) "Let us subject to chemical analysis this host you consume at mass to learn if there is indeed protoplasm in the transubstantiated wafer and hemoglobin in the wine"—a suggestion which, if I made it, would get me called a blockhead or worse. As I say, they simply no longer understand the true materialist temper.

It is for a related reason that I keep the Folly so carefully under lock and key—a circumstance that I imagine had been puzzling you, Di. Once in an unwise burst of enthusiasm I told my students about the Folly. Instead of receiving the information with bored incomprehension or kindly indulgence, a mischevious cruelty seized them. Attempts were made by doctoring the tape to hoax me into thinking I had achieved fabulous results. Since then I have taken stern precautions and I have told no one about the Folly, no one, at all, except . . .

Oh, let me hold the door for you. Thank you. Ah, the night is refreshingly chill—I see traces of snow in the shadows—and for once Chicago's air seems smog-free, though

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acid and cold. We will let it stream through our beings and blow away the stuffy preoccupations of an old man who has lived too long with molecules.

That's a strange thing, Di, but I just now seemed to smell roses, an abundance of roses. Oh, is it your perfume? No —no, I see that yours is a very different scent though equally delightful. Pardon me if I seem flustered, but I don't know when a young lady has leaned her cheek so close to mine—even in the interests of scientific accuracy. You put the perfume behind the lobe of your ear?—that's charming.

You smelled the roses too? You shared my illusion?—if it was one. Roses in January in Chicago snows—a delightful circumstance. Perhaps a hearse skidded and overset nearby—or don't you enjoy macabre fancies?

In Chicago one must learn to treasure each hint of the marvelous or outlandish—there are few enough of them at best to offset the dismalness of the city, its grime, its stenches, its shrieking, roaring, growling, rumbling tumult that distantly assaults our ears even here in these gray gothic precincts. A grimly lonely city. When I first came here as a fellow (my entire academic life, Di, has been spent in this one institution) it seemed to me that Chicago's loneliness was an almost unbearable continuation, in a darker mode, of the loneliness of my childhood and youth. The whine of its elevated trains and the screech of its streetcars, the angry chug of its taxicabs and the pounding of its presses (augmented now by the drone of its aircraft, even the boom of its jets, and not to mention the heavier minatory sounds that proceed from its railway yards, docks and factory districts)—all these noises became an integral part of my consciousness.

Listen to the Song of Chicago, Di! Listen to the steel tomtoms and rattles of modern primitive man. The more noise the less message, the new men say—I sometimes understand what that means. Listen to the Music of the Spheres, Midwestern style—I might venture to call it the Jazz of the Gears. I wonder if, to more sensitive ears, the molecules in the Folly make any such muted pandemonium? What? Yes, I'll be quiet.

Di, you're right! You're right! It was incredible, but it did happen. For a moment

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—no, for several seconds—the sounds of the city became the notes of a great symphony, tragic and darkly majestic. Let us listen again. No, it is gone now. Oh, I suppose it might have been a powerful hi-fi briefly yet smoothly turned up, perhaps in the dormitory there—no, I will not believe that, I will never believe it!—*it was the random sounds of the city we heard and for several seconds they became powerful, perfect music.* Marihuana, I have read, produces such illusions, but I have never smoked even nicotine. Well, this *is* becoming a night for wonders! I shall always think you somehow responsible for them, Di.

Di, it occurs to me that what we have just shared the privilege of hearing is an excellent chance example of what I am trying to achieve under laboratory conditions in the Folly. It has been said that if you set a billion monkeys to pounding on a billion typewriters they would eventually write among other things *purely by chance* the entire Encyclopedia Britannica. There are several catches to that one, especially the length of time represented by the "eventually" and the question of the means of checking the monkey pages for intelligibility and of recognizing and fitting together the fragments. Still, it seems to me that we have here a valid analogy: *listen to the random noises of a city long enough* and you will eventually catch a section where purely by chance they counterfeit a great unknown symphony. It is another case of waiting for three weeks of thirteen-hearts-hands and—in this case—getting them!

Also it occurs to me that the roses we swore we smelled might conceivably be put in the same or a nearby category. Some physiologists believe that odor is a matter of formula and that various combinations of molecules, some common, some most rare, will produce the same scent when impinging on the receptors in the nasal membrane. *Sniff the acrid atmosphere of a city long enough* and you will eventually inhale a rare combination of industrial molecules that counterfeits the scent of roses. Oh, what travesties the cruder of my colleagues would make of that notion!

I suppose there must be some humdrum explanation in both cases (though I don't really believe that) but just

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the same I feel extraordinarily exhilarated. You know, Di, I have searched for the miraculous all my life, in my austere fashion — Maxwell's demon is a god of sorts, and how else would any god manifest itself except by bringing about the occurrence of the vastly improbable? Tonight for the first time I believe my desire has achieved fruition or at least the illusion thereof. When I was a child—this is something I have told to very few people, Di, very very few —when I was a child I became enamoured of Greek mythology (Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was one of my first books) and in my loneliness I peopled the empty lots around my home and the park nearby with the deities and monsters of classic Greece. In a glade in the park (really a bare space behind some bushes) I reared rude altars (little more than shingles with flowers and bright trinkets and assorted childish treasures set on them as offerings) to Pan and Diana.

Yes, Di, to your namesake! To Diana, the slim moon-goddess, the virgin huntress. Much later it occurred to me that here I might have made a mistake (no, not a mistake precisely—I do not blaspheme your namesake, Di) in making my offerings to Diana rather than Venus, for no lovely young lady ever came to share my life. I have always been a votary of the chaste Silver One—Miss Silvers! What a night for coincidences!

Small wonder, really, that I remain celibate, for I was always singularly timid, credulous and inept in my very limited contacts with the opposite sex. Why, I was such a num-noddy in such matters, especially during my college years, that I was once cruelly hoaxed. I was accosted in the dormitory corridors by a slim and very pretty young lady who claimed to be in need of immediate assistance with her costume—a pin for her underskirt was wanted. In fear and secret delight I invited her into my room, where she lingered for an embarrassingly blissfully long time and finally wantonly approached me. A few moments later there was a chorus of laughter from a group of hidden eavesdroppers and the secret was out—the young lady was the "feminine" lead in the all-male Capers, or whatever they called their yearly show.

And that is something I have never told another soul. A distressful anecdote, really,

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with distasteful overtones—I hardly know why I should have burdened you with it. Come, let us return. Here's our doorway again. We have taken rather long, Olafson will have climbed from his Hole and be waiting at the Folly.

Di, why did you touch my cheek? Look up, you say?

Di, that glimmering! What is it? What *are* they? What are those ghostly figures of ice and fire moving up the sky, those jeweled deities, that heroic procession? I'm frightened, Di, hold me close—no, no, pardon an old man's weakness, but what was it that we saw? I'm shaking still. What was it? *Again* the impossibly improbable? *Look at the multitudinous lights of a city long enough . . .*

Di, what's happening tonight? What are you doing? —it is your doing, isn't it? All of a sudden these things are too much for me, too many for me. Why did you come to me tonight? Why did you come back, really? Were you really a student of mine? Is this some last hoax? No, I don't see how, but—

The Folly? We can't go to the Folly now. I feel . . . Yes, I suppose we could, but . . . Very well.

Di! Yes, I'm coming, but the stone, here, by the door—it feels like velvet, like silver velvet! *Touch gray stone long enough . . .* Di, am I going mad? Wait for me, Di!

Watch out, Di! Watch out for Olafson—I don't think he can see you. Olafson, don't walk into the lady! Olafson, what's happened to you? Olafson!

He moves past us as if we weren't there! And he's smiling, smiling like a man in ecstasy. Do you see that? *Olafson is smiling.*

What's that that fluttered from his hand? I'll get it. A torn-off scrap of paper—the Folly's last measurements. I'll look at them.

.99999	.99999
1.00000	.99999
1.00000	.99999
.00000	2.00000
1.00000	.99999
.99999	1.00001

Di! Where are you, Di? *Di, who were you?*

THE END

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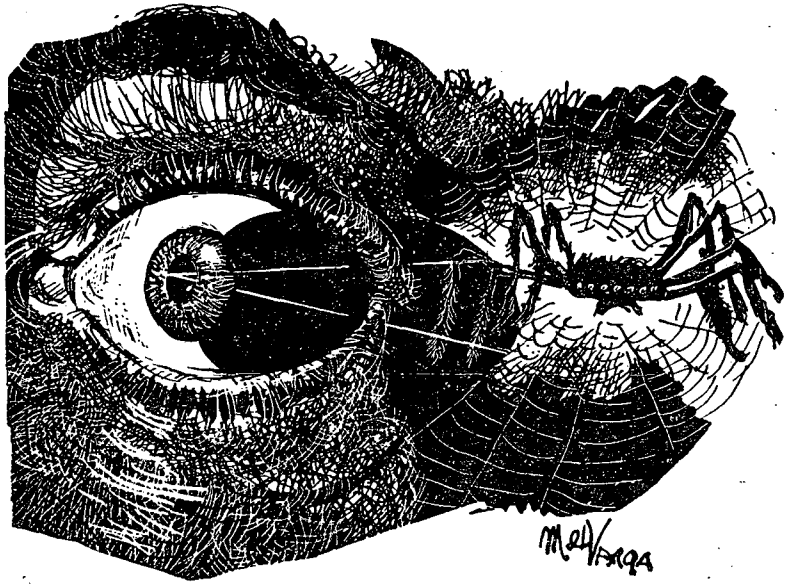

Togetherness was more than a slogan for the descendants of Grandfather Horn. It was a unique and enriching hereditary development—until the fearful intrusion of...

THE MIND SPIDER

HOUR and minute hand of the odd little gray clock stood almost at midnight, Horn Time, and now the second hand, driven by the same tiny, invariable radioactive pulses, was hurrying to overtake them. Morton Horn took note. He switched off his book, puffed a brown cigarette

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alight, and slumped back gratefully against the saddle-shaped forcefield which combined the sensations of swansdown and laced rawhide.

When all three hands stood together, he flicked the switch of a small black cubical box in his smock pocket. A look of expectancy came into his pleasant, swarthy face, as if he were about to receive a caller, although the door had not spoken.

With the flicking of the switch a curtain of brain-wave static surrounding his mind vanished. Unnoticed while present, because it was a meaningless thought-tone—a kind of mental gray—the vanishing static left behind a great inward silence and emptiness. To Morton it was as if his mind had crept from a cozy box lined with cotton wool and were crouched on a mountainpeak in infinity.

"Hello, Mort. Are we first?"

A stranger in the room could not have heard those words, yet to Mort they were the cheeriest and friendliest greeting imaginable—words clear as crystal without any of the air-noise or bone-noise that blurs ordinary speech, and they sounded like chocolate tastes.

"Guess so, Sis," his every thoughts responded, "unless the others have started a shaded contact at their end."

His mind swiftly absorbed a vision of his sister Grayl's studio upstairs, just as it appeared to her. A corner of the work table, littered with air-brushes and cans of dye and acid. The easel, with one half-completed film for the multi-level picture she was spraying, now clouded by cigarette smoke. In the foreground, the shimmery gray curve of her skirt and the slim, competent beauty of her hands, so close—especially when she raised the cigarette to puff it—that they seemed his own. The feathery touch of her clothes on her skin. The sharp cool tingly tone of her muscles. In the background, only floor and cloudy sky, for the glastic walls of her studio did not refract.

The vision seemed a ghostly thing at first, a shadowy projection against the solid walls of his own study. But as the contact between their minds deepened, it grew more real. For a moment the two visual images swung apart and stood side by side, equally real, as if he were trying to focus one with each eye. Then for another moment his room became the ghost room and Grayl's the real one—as if he

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had become Grayl. He raised the cigarette in her hand to her lips and inhaled the pleasant fumes, milder than those of his own *rompe-pecho*. Then he savored the two at once and enjoyed the mental blending of her Virginia cigarette with his own Mexican "chest-breaker."

From the depths of her . . . his . . . *their* mind Grayl laughed at him amiably.

"Here now, don't go sliding into *all* of me!" she told him. "A girl ought to be allowed some privacy."

"Should she?" he asked teasingly.

"Well, at least leave me my fingers and toes! What if Fred had been visiting me?"

"I knew he wasn't," Morton replied. "You know, Sis, I'd never invade your body while you were with your non-telepathic sweetheart."

"Nonsense, you'd love to, you old hedonist!—and I don't think I'd grudge you the experience—especially if at the same time you let me be with your lovely Helen! But now please get out of me. *Please*, Morton."

He retreated obediently until their thoughts met only at the edges. But he had noticed something strangely skittish in her first reaction. There had been a touch of hysteria in even the laughter and banter and certainly in the final plea. And there had been a knot of something like fear under her breastbone. He questioned her about it. Swiftly as the thoughts of one person, the mental dialogue spun itself out.

"Really afraid of me taking control of you, Grayl?"

"Of course not, Mort! I'm as keen for control-exchange experiments as any of us, especially when I exchange with a man. But . . . we're so exposed, Mort—it sometimes bugs me."

"How do you mean exactly?"

"You know, Mort. Ordinary people are protected. Their minds are walled in from birth, and behind the walls it may be stuffy but it's very safe. So safe that they don't even realize that there *are* walls . . . that there are frontiers of mind as well as frontiers of matter . . . . and that things can get at you across those frontiers."

"What sort of things? Ghosts? Martians? Angels? Evil spirits? Voices from the Beyond? Big bad black static-clouds?" His response was joshing. "You know how flatly we've failed to establish any contacts in those direc-

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tions. As mediums we're a howling failure. We've never got so much as a hint of any telepathic mentalities save our own. Nothing in the whole mental universe but silence and occasional clouds of noise —static—*and* the sound of distant Horns, if you'll pardon the family pun."

"I know, Mort. But we're such a tiny young cluster of mind, and the universe is an awfully big place and there's a chance of some awfully queer things existing in it. Just yesterday I was reading an old Russian novel from the Years of Turmoil and one of the characters said something that my memory photographed. Now where did I tuck it away?— No, keep out of my files, Mort! I've got it anyway—here it is."

A white oblong bobbed up in her mind. Morton read the black print on it.

"We always imagine eternity (it said) as something beyond our conception, something vast, vast! But why must it be vast? Instead of all that, what if it's one little room, like a bathhouse in the country, black and grimy and spiders in every corner, and that's all eternity is? I sometimes fancy it like that."

"Brrr!" Morton thought, trying to make the shiver comic for Grayl's sake. "Those old White and Red Russkies certainly had black minds! Andreyev? Dostoyevsky?"

"Or Svidrigailov, or some name like that. But it wasn't the book that bothered me. It was that about an hour ago I switched off my static box to taste the silence and for the first time in my life I got the feeling there was something nasty and alien in infinity and that it was watching me, just like those spiders in the bathhouse. It had been asleep for centuries but now it was waking up. I switched on my box *fast.*"

"Ho-ho! The power of suggestion! Are you sure that Russian wasn't named Svengali, dear self-hypnosis-susceptible sister?"

"Stop poking fun! It was *real,* I tell you."

"Real? How? Sounds like mood-reality to me. Here, stop being so ticklish and let me get a close-up."

He started mock-forcibly to explore her memories, thinking that a friendly mental roughhouse might be what she needed, but she pushed away his thought-tendrils with a panicky and deathly-serious insistence. Then he saw her decisively stub out

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her cigarette and he felt a sudden secretive chilling of her feelings.

"It's all really nothing, Mort," she told him briskly. "Just a mood, I guess, like you say. No use bothering a family conference with a mood, no matter how black and devilish."

"Speaking of the devil and his cohorts, here we are! May we come in?" The texture of the interrupting thought was bluff and yet ironic, highly individual—suggesting not chocolate but black coffee. Even if Mort and Grayl had not been well acquainted with its tone and rhythms, they would have recognized it as that of a third person. It was as if a third dimension had been added to the two of their shared mind. They knew it immediately.

"Make yourself at home, Uncle Dean," was the welcome Grayl gave him. "Our minds are yours."

"Very cozy indeed," the newcomer responded with a show of gruff amusement. "I'll do as you say, my dear. Good to be in each other again." They caught a glimpse of scudding ragged clouds patching steel-blue sky above to gray-green forest below—their uncle's work as a ranger kept him up in his flyabout a good deal of the day.

"Dean Horn coming in," he announced with a touch of formality and then immediately added, "Nice tidy little mental parlor you've got, as the fly said to the spider."

"Uncle Dean!—what made you think of spiders?" Grayl's question was sharply anxious.

"Haven't the faintest notion, my dear. Maybe recalling the time we took turns mind-sitting with Evelyn until she got over her infant fear of spiders. More likely just reflecting a thought-flicker from your own unconscious or Morton's. Why the fear-flurry?"

But just then a fourth mind joined them—resinous in flavor like Greek wine. "Hobart Horn coming in." They saw a ghostly laboratory, with chemical apparatus.

Then a fifth—sweet-sour apple-tasting. "Evelyn Horn coming in. Yes, Grayl, late as usual — thirty-seven seconds by Horn Time. I didn't miss your cluck-cluck thought." The newcomer's tartness was unmalicious. They glimpsed the large office in which Evelyn worked, the microtypewriter and rolls of correspondence tape on her desk. "But

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—bright truth!—someone always has to be last," she continued. "And I'm working overtime. Always make a family conference, though. Afterwards will you take control of me, Grayl, and spell me at this typing for a while? I'm really fagged—and I don't want to leave my body on automatic too long. It gets hostile on automatic and hurts to squeeze back into. How about it, Grayl?"

"I will," Grayl promised, "but don't make it a habit. I don't know what your administrator would say if he knew you kept sneaking off two thousand miles to my studio to smoke cigarettes—and get *my* throat raw for me!"

"All present and accounted for," Mort remarked. "Evelyn, Grayl, Uncle Dean, Hobart, and myself—the whole damn family. Would you care to share my day's experiences first? Pretty dull armchair stuff, I warn you. Or shall we make it a five-dimensional free-for-all? A Quintet for Horns? Hey, Evelyn, quit directing four-letter thoughts at the chair!"

With that the conference got underway. Five minds that were in a sense one mind, because they were wide open to each other, and in another sense twenty-five minds, because there were five sensory-memory set-ups available for each individual. Five separate individuals, some of them thousands of miles apart, each viewing a different sector of the world of the First Global Democracy. Five separate visual landscapes—study, studio, laboratory, office, and the cloud-studded opennes of the upper air—all of them existing in one mental space, now superimposed on each other, now replacing each other, now jostling each other as two ideas may jostle in a single non-telepathic mind. Five varying auditory landscapes—the deep throb of the vanes of Dean's flyabout making the dominant tone, around which the other noises wove counterpoint. In short, five complete sensory pictures, open to mutual inspection.

Five different ideational set-ups too. Five concepts of truth and beauty and honor, of good and bad, of wise and foolish, and of all the other so-called abstractions with which men and women direct their lives—all different, yet all vastly more similar than such concepts are among the non-telepathic, who can never really share them. Five different ideas of life, jumbled together like dice in a box.

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And yet there was no confusion. The dice were educated. The five minds slipped into and out of each other with the practiced grace and courtesy of diplomats at a tea. For these daily conferences had been going on ever since Grandfather Horn first discovered that he could communicate mentally with his children. Until then he had not known that he was a telepathic mutant, for before his children were born there had been no other minds with which he could communicate —and the strange mental silence, disturbed from time to time by clouds of mental static, had even made him fear that he was psychotic. Now Grandfather Horn was dead, but the conferences went on between the members of the slowly widening circle of his lineal descendants—at present only five in number, although the mutation appeared to be a partial dominant. The conferences of the Horns were still as secret as the earliest ones had been. The First Global Democracy was still ignorant that telepathy was a long-established fact—among the Horns. For the Horns believed that jealousy and suspicion and savage hate would be what they would get from the world if it ever became generally known that, by the chance of mutated heredity, they possesed a power which other men could never hope for. Or else they would be exploited as all-weather and interplanetary "radios." So to the outside world, including even their non-telepathic husbands and wives, sweethearts and friends, they were just an ordinary group of blood relations—no more "psychic" certainly than any group of close-knit brothers and sisters and cousins. They had something of a reputation of being a family of "daydreamers"—that was about all. Beyond enriching their personalities and experience, the Horns' telepathy was no great advantage to them. They could not read the minds of animals and other humans and they seemed to have no powers whatever of clairvoyance, clairaudience, telekinesis, or foreseeing the future or past. Their telepathic power was, in short, simply like having a private, all-senses family telephone.

The conference — it was much more a hyper-intimate gabfest—proceeded.

"My static box bugged out for a few ticks this morning," Evelyn remarked in the

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course of talking over the trivia of the past twenty-four hours.

The static boxes were an invention of Grandfather Horn. They generated a tiny cloud of meaningless brain waves. Without such individual thought-screens, there was too much danger of complete loss of individual personality —once Grandfather Horn had "become" his infant daughter as well as himself for several hours and the unfledged mind had come close to being permanently lost in its own subconscious. The static boxes provided a mental wall behind which a mind could safely grow and function, similar to the wall by which ordinary minds are apparently always enclosed.

In spite of the boxes, the Horns shared thoughts and emotions to an amazing degree. Their mental togetherness was as real and as mysterious—and as incredible—as thought itself . . . and thought is the original angel-cloud dancing on the head of a pin. Their present conference was as warm and intimate and tart as any actual family gathering in one actual room around one actual table. Five minds, joined together in the vast mental darkness that shrouds *all* minds. Five minds hugged together for comfort and safety in the infinite mental loneliness that pervades the cosmos.

Evelyn continued, "Your boxes were all working, of course, so I couldn't get your thoughts—just the blurs of your boxes like little old dark gray stars. But this time it gave me a funny uncomfortable feeling, like a spider crawling down my—Grayl! Don't *feel* so wildly! What *is* it?"

Then . . . just as Grayl started to think her answer . . . *something crept from the vast mental darkness and infinite cosmic loneliness surrounding the five minds of the Horns.*

Grayl was the first to notice. Her panicky thought had the curling too-keen edge of hysteria. "There are six of us now! There should only be five, but there are six. Count! Count, I tell you! Six!"

To Mort it seemed that a gigantic spider was racing across the web of their thoughts. He felt Dean's hands grip convulsively at the controls of his flyabout. He felt Evelyn's slave-body freeze at her desk and Hobart grope out blindly so that a piece of apparatus fell with a crystalline tinkle. As if they

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had been sitting together at dinner and had suddenly realized that there was a sixth place set and a tall figure swathed in shadows sitting at it. A figure that to Mort exuded an overpowering taste and odor of brass—a sour metallic stench.

And then that figure spoke. The greater portion of the intruder's thought was alien, unintelligible, frightening in its expresion of an unearthly power and an unearthly hunger.

The understandable portion of its speech seemed to be in the nature of a bitter and coldly menacing greeting, insofar as references and emotional sense could be at all determined.

"I, the Mind Spider as you name me—the deathless one, the eternally exiled, the eternally imprisoned—or so his overconfident enemies suppose —coming in."

Mort saw the danger almost too late—and he was the first to see it. He snatched toward the static box in his smock.

In what seemd no more than an instant he saw the shadow of the intruder darken the four other minds, saw them caught and wrapped in the intruder's thoughts, just as a spider twirls a shroud around its victims, saw the black half - intelligible thoughts of the intruder scuttle toward him with blinding speed, felt the fanged impact of indomitable power, felt his own will fail.

There was a click. By a hairsbreath his fingers had carried out their mission. Around his mind the neutral gray wall was up and—Thank the Lord!—it appeared that the intruder could not penetrate it.

Mort sat there gasping, shaking, staring with the dull eyes of shock. Direct mental contact with the utterly inhuman—with *that* sort of inhumanity — is not something that can be lightly brushed aside or ever forgot. It makes a wound. For minutes afterwards a man cannot think at all.

And the brassy stench lingered, tainting his entire consciousness—a stench of Satanic power and melancholy.

When he finally sprang up, it was not because he had thought things out but because he heard a faint sound behind him and knew with a chilling certainty that it meant death.

It was Grayl. She was carrying an airbrush as if it were a gun. She had kicked off her shoes. Poised there in the

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doorway she was the incarnation of taut stealthiness, as if she had sloughed off centuries of civilization in seconds of time, leaving only the primeval core of the jungle killer.

But it was her face that was the worst, and the most revealing. Pale and immobile as a corpse's—almost. But the little more left over from the "almost" was a spiderish implacability, the source of which Mort knew only too well.

She pointed the airbrush at his eyes. His sidewise twist saved them from the narrow pencil of oily liquid that spat from the readjusted nozzle, but a little splashed against his hand and he felt the bite of acid. He lunged toward her, ducking away from the spray as she whipped it back toward him. He caught her wrist, bowled into her, and caried her with him to the floor.

She dropped the airbrush and fought—with teeth and claws, like a cat, yet with this horrible difference that it was not like an animal lashing out instinctively but like an animal listening for orders and obeying them.

Suddenly she went limp. The static from his box had taken effect. He made doubly sure by switching on hers.

She was longer than he had been in recovering from the shock, but when she began to speak it was with a rush, as if she already realized that every minute was vital.

"We've got to stop the others, Mort, before they let it out. The . . . the Mind Spider, Mort! It's been imprisoned for eons, for cosmic ages. First floating in space, then in the Antarctic, where its prison spiralled to Earth. Its enemies . . . really its judges . . . *had* to imprison it, because it's something that can't be killed. I can't make you understand just why they imprisoned it—" (Her face went a shade grayer) "—you'd have to experience the creature's thoughts for that—but it had to do with the perversion and destruction of the life-envelopes of more than one planet."

Even under the stress of horror, Mort had time to realize how strange it was to be listening to Grayl's words instead of her thoughts. They never used words except when ordinary people were present. It was like acting in a play. Suddenly it occurred to him that they would never be able to share thoughts again. Why, if their static boxes were to fail for a few seconds, as Evelyn's had this morning . . .

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"That's where it's been," Grayl continud, "locked in the heart of the Antarctic, dreaming its centuries-long dreams of escape and revenge, waking now and again to rage against its captivity and rack its mind with a thousand schemes—and searching, searching, always searching! Searching for telepathic contact with creatures capable of operating the locks of its prison. And now, waking after its last fifty year trance, finding them!"

He nodded and caught her trembling hands in his.

"Look," he said, "do you know where the creature's prison is located?"

She glanced up at him fearfully. "Oh yes, it printed the coordinates of the place on my mind as if my brain were graph paper. You see, the creature has a kind of colorless perception that lets it see out of its prison. It sees through rock as it sees through air and what it sees it measures. I'm sure that it knows all about Earth—because it knows exactly what it wants to do with Earth, beginning with the forced evolution of new dominant life forms from the insects and arachnids . . and other organisms whose sensation-tone pleases it more than that of the mammals."

He nodded again. "All right," he said, "that pretty well settles what you and I have got to do. Dean and Hobart and Evelyn are under its control—we've got to suppose that. It may detach one or even two of them for the side job of finishing us off, just as it tried to use you to finish me. But it's a dead certainty that it's guiding at least one of them as fast as is humanly possible to its prison, to release it. We can't call in Interplanetary Police or look for help anywhere. Everything hinges on our being telepathic, and it would take days to convince them even of that. We've got to handle this all by ourselves. There's not a soul in the world can help us. We've got to hire an all-purpose flyabout that can make the trip, and we've got to go down there. While you were unconscious I put through some calls. Evelyn has left the office. She hasn't gone home. Hobart should be at his laboratory, but he isn't. Dean's home station can't get in touch with him. We can't hope to intercept them on the way —I thought of getting I. P. to nab them by inventing some charges against them, but that would probably end

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with the police stopping *us*. The only place where we have a chance of finding them, and of stopping them, is down there, where *it* is.

"And we'll have to be ready to kill them."

For millenniums piled on millenniums, the gales of Earth's loftiest, coldest, loneliest continent had driven the powdered ice against the dull metal without scoring it, without rusting it, without even polishing it. Like some grim temple sacred to pitiless gods it rose from the Antarctic gorge, a blunt hemisphere ridged with steps, with a tilted platform at the top, as if for an altar. A temple built to outlast eternity. Unmistakably the impression came through that this structure was older than Earth, older perhaps than the low-circling sun, that it had felt colds to which this was summer warmth, that it had known the grip of forces to which these ice-fisted gales were playful breezes, that it had known loneliness to which this white wasteland was teeming with life.

Not so the two tiny figures struggling toward it from one of three flyabouts lying crazily atilt on the drifts. Their every movement betrayed frail humanity. They stumbled and swayed, leaning into the wind. Sometimes a gust would send them staggering. Sometimes one would fall. But always they came on. Though their clothing appeared roughly adequate—the sort of polar clothing a person might snatch up in five minutes in the temperate zone—it was obvious that they could not survive long in this frigid region. But that did not seem to trouble them.

Behind them toiled two other tiny figures, coming from the second grounded flyabout. Slowly, very slowly, they gained on the first two. Then a fifth figure came from behind a drift and confronted the second pair.

"Steady now. Steady!" Dean Horn shouted against the wind, leveling his blaster. "Mort! Grayl! For your lives, don't move!"

For a moment these words resounded in Mort's ears with the inhuman and mocking finality of the Antarctic gale. Then the faintly hopeful thought came to him that Dean would hardly have spoken that way if he had been under the creature's control. He would hardly have bothered to speak at all.

The wind shrieked and tore. Mort staggered and threw an

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arm around Grayl's shoulders for mutual support.

Dean fought his way toward them, blaster always leveled. In his other hand he had a small black cube—his static box, Mort recognized. He held it a little in front of him (like a cross, Mort thought) and as he came close to them he thrust it toward their heads (as if he were exorcising demons, Mort thought). Only then did Dean lower the muzzle of his blaster.

Mort said, "I'm glad you didn't count lurching with the wind as moving."

Dean smiled harshly. "I dodged the thing, too," he explained. "Just managed to flick on my static box. Like you did, I guess. Only I had no way of knowing that, so when I saw you I had to make sure. I—"

The circular beam of a blaster hissed into the drift beside them, raising a great cloud of steam and making a hole wide as a bushel basket. Mort lunged at Dean, toppling him down out of range, pulling Grayl after.

"Hobart and Evelyn!" He pointed. "In the hollow ahead! Blast to keep them in it, Dean. What I've got in mind won't take long. Grayl, stay close to Dean . . . and give me your static box!"

He crawled forward along a curve that would take him to the edge of the hollow. Behind him and at the further side of the hollow, snow puffed into clouds of steam as the blasters spat free energy. Finally he glimpsed a shoulder, cap, and upturned collar. He estimated the distance, hefted Grayl's static box, guessed at the wind and made a measured throw. Blaster-fire from the hollow ceased. He rushed forward, waving to Dean and Grayl.

Hobart was sitting in the snow, staring dazedly at the weapon in his hand, as if it could tell him why he'd done what he'd done. He looked up at Mort with foggy eyes. The black static box had lodged in the collar of his coat and Mort felt a surge of confidence at the freakish accuracy of his toss.

But Evelyn was nowehere in sight. Over the lip of the hollow, very close now, appeared the ridged and dully gleaming hemisphere, like the ascendant disk of some tiny and ill-boding asteroid. A coldness that was more than that of the ice-edged wind went through Mort. He snatched Hobart's blaster and

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ran. The others shouted after him, but he only waved back at them once, frantically.

The metal of the steps seemed to suck warmth even from the wind that ripped at his back like a snow-tiger as he climbed. The steps were as crazily tilted as those in a nightmare, and there seemed always to be more of them, as if they were somehow growing and multiplying. He found himself wondering if material and mental steps could ever get mixed.

He reached the platform. As his head came up over the edge, he saw, hardly a dozen feet away, Evelyn's face, blue with cold but having frozen into it the same spiderish expression he had once seen in Grayl's. He raised the blaster, but in the same moment the face dropped out of sight. There was a metallic clang. He scrambled up onto the platform and clawed impotently at the circular plate barring the opening into which Evelyn had vanished. He was still crouched there when the others joined him.

The demon wind had died, as if it were the Mind Spider's ally and had done its work. The hush was like a prelude to a planet's end, and Hobart's bleak words, gasped out disjointedly, were like the sentence of doom.

"There are two doors. The thing told us all about them . . . while we were under its control. The first would be open . . . we were to go inside and shut it behind us. That's what Evelyn's done . . . she's locked it from the inside . . . just the simplest sliding bolt . . . but it will keep us from getting at her . . . while she activates the locks of the second door . . . the real door. We weren't to get the instructions . . . on how to do that . . . until we got inside."

"Stand aside," Dean said, aiming his blaster at the trapdoor, but he said it dully, as if he knew beforehand that it wasn't going to work. Waves of heat made the white hill beyond them waver. But the dull metal did not change color and when Dean cut off his blaster and tossed down a handful of snow on the spot, it did not melt.

Mort found himself wondering if you could make a metal of frozen thought. Through his numbed mind flashed a panorama of the rich lands and seas of the Global Democracy they had flown over yesterday—the green-framed white power stations of the Orinoco, the fabulous walking cities of the Amazon

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Basin, the jet-atomic launching fields of the Gran Chaco, the multi - domed Oceanographic Institute of the Falkland Islands. A dawn world, you might call it. He wondered vaguely if other dawn worlds had struggled an hour or two into the morning only to fall prey to things like the Mind Spider.

"No!" The word came like a command heard in a dream. He looked up dully and realized that it was Grayl who had spoken—realized, with stupid amazement, that her eyes were flashing with anger.

"No! There's still one way we can get at it and try to stop it. The same way it got at us. Thought! It took us by surprise. We didn't have time to prepare resistance. We were panicked and it's given us a permanent panic-psychology. We could only think of getting behind our thought-screens and about how—once there—we'd never dare come out again. Maybe this time, if we all stand firm when we open our screens . . .

"I know it's a slim chance, a crazy chance . . ."

Mort knew that too. So did Dean and Hobart. But something in him, and in them, rejoiced at Grayl's words, rejoiced at the prospect of meeting the thing, however hopelessly, on its own ground, mind to mind. Without hesitation they brought out their static boxes and, at the signal of Dean's hand uplifted, switched them off.

That action plunged them from a material wilderness of snow and bleakly clouded sky into a sunless, dimensionless wilderness of thought. Like some lone fortress on an endless plain, their minds linked together, foursquare, waiting the assault. And like some monster of nightmare, the thoughts of the creature that accepted the name of the Mind Spider rushed toward them across that plain, threatening to overmaster them by the Satanic prestige that absolute selfishness and utter cruelty confer. The brassy stench of its being was like a poison cloud.

They held firm. The thoughts of the Mind Spider darted about, seeking a weak point, then seemed to settle down upon them everywhere, engulfingly, like a dry black web.

Alien against human, egocentric killer-mind against mutually loyal preserver-minds—and in the end it was the mutual loyalty and knittedness that turned the tide,

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giving them each a four-fold power of resistance. The thoughts of the Mind Spider retreated. Theirs pressed after. They sensed that a corner of his mind was not truly his. They pressed a pincers attack at that point, seeking to cut it off. There was a moment of desperate resistance. Then suddenly they were no longer four minds against the Spider, but five.

The trapdoor opened. It was Evelyn. They could at last switch on their thought-screens and find refuge behind the walls of neutral gray and prepare to fight back to their flyabouts and save their bodies.

But there was something that had to be said first, something that Mort said for them.

"The danger remains and we probably can't ever destroy it. *They* couldn't destroy it, or they wouldn't have built this prison. We can't tell anyone about it. Non-telepaths wouldn't believe all our story and would want to find out what was inside. We Horns have the job of being a monster's jailers. Maybe some day we'll be able to practice telepathy again—behind some sort of static-spheres. We will have to prepare for that time and work out many precautions, such as keying our static boxes, so that switching on one switches on all. But the Mind Spider and its prison remains our responsibility and our trust, forever."

THE END

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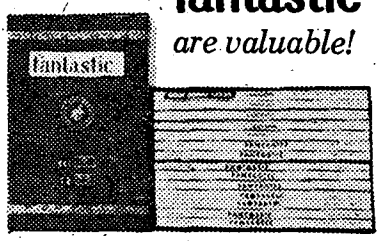

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Gravity, shmavity, how do you make it pay off? Not, certainly, by approaching . . .

THE IMPROPER AUTHORITIES

AS SOON as Ronald Flecker fully convinced himself that he had discovered in his eccentric aunt's cluttered basement a small battery that stored the force of gravity instead of electricity—a battery that held in complete essence the power of fuelless spaceflight, levitation, and any number of lesser marvels—he sat down to do some very serious thinking.

The discovery had come about while he was repairing his aunt's doorbell—one of the innumerable small tasks she hesitantly but in the end always rather firmly set him, although she had more than enough money to hire professional household mechanics, and that Ronald in any case always felt obliged to discharge in return for the privilege of sleeping over her garage. He had found the thin wires in a monstrous tangle close under the dusty rafters. It turned out the system wasn't even worked by a step-down transformer but by dry cells and some idiot had hooked up the cells in parallel rather than series, accounting in large part for the doorbell's feeble performance. His aunt recalled that the last person before Ronald to revive the doorbell had been the kindly but abstracted and rather smelly Dr. Yorn, the second-to-last in her unending series of spiritual counselors—a yogi, medium, hypnotist, dynamic psychologist, something like that. Mrs. Wycherly liked variety and versatile men. Dr. Yorn's successor, the gleaming-eyed and dap-

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per Mr. Espy, seemed equally obliging and would almost certainly have been willing to tackle the doorbell, but now Mrs. Wycherly had Ronald for those things.

Ronald had picked out the three freshest looking dry cells, setting the other two, which still had short bent lengths of wire untidily attached to their terminals, down on the scarred top of an upended trunk beside the stepladder on which he was working. It was still day outside, barely, although of course he had a flashlight to see up into the cobwebby rafters, and just as he'd about connected up the three newer looking cells properly, working a little gingerly because of his apprehension of spiders, a beam of yellow light from the setting sun struck brightly through one of the low oblong windows and across the top of the trunk. It showed a lot more dust motes trembling in the air than Ronald's flashlight revealed, and immediately Ronald felt a sneeze coming on. But then it showed something so much more strange and arresting that the sneeze never came and Ronald quite forgot that his nasal passages had been tickling.

One of the rejected batteries carried attached to one terminal a length of gray-insulated wire so sharply curved that its other end now chanced to touch the other terminal, shorting the battery out—except that the battery had looked to Ronald too dingy and old to have any juice left to short.

The dust motes were whirling in orderly circles around the wire, forming a dim tube that curved from terminal to terminal with the wire running down the center or axis of the shadowy tube. The circular orbiting of the dust motes was clearest within an inch of the wire, but even as he watched he saw some of the more distant motes begin to take up the movement, swinging in larger, slower circles.

Ronald's face grew blank with attention. He leaned down very slowly until his eyes were only inches from the phenomenon. Fearfully, almost reverently he blew softly at the wire. The motes eddied away wildly and then almost immediately began to resume their circling, those nearest the wire taking it up most quickly, then those further off starting once more to join in.

Ronald thought: *There's a*

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At the approach of Mr. Espy, a startled Ronald saw the battery lift right out of his hands.

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force moving those particles. They're in a force-field. If they were powdered iron or black iron oxide (but they aren't) it would be a magnetic field moving them, a magnetic field created by an electric current moving through the wire, though I think it would have to be a lot stronger current than a dry cell could furnish.

But the particles aren't iron or iron oxide (too heavy to float in air, besides this has to be just Wycherly basement dust—ashes, lint, earth, powdered wood and paper) so it can't be a magnetic field that's moving them, though they're moving exactly as if they were in a force-field of some sort. So it has to be gravity . . . a gravitic force-field they're moving in, at least that's the only other force I know of it could be.

An electric current moving through a conductor creates a magnetic field.

A what?-current . . . call it a gravitic current anyway . . . though it could be a magnetic *current . . . a gravitic current moving through a conductor creates a gravitic field.*

The sunlight faded swiftly. As the yellow beam moved upward, dimming, its last rays showed more and more dust motes pouring into the vortex, joining in the frenzied yet orderly circling.

As the dark basement twilight closed in, Ronald reached out and grasped the battery protectively, possessively. With his other hand he bent the wire away from the terminal. Already he had begun to worry about the battery running down.

A minute or so later it occurred to him to use his flashlight to examine the battery more closely. It was a distinctly smaller cylinder than the other dry cells, he saw now—only about five inches high and an inch-and-a-half in diameter—and it had no cardboard sheath around it, which had been the chief reason he'd thought of it as older and more likely to be completely exhausted than the others. And the terminals, although of the screw-on, knurled-nut type, didn't seem to be brass, but something grayer, like the zinc, or whatever it was, of the battery's body.

He tried to force himself to think in a systematic way about the possible *source* of the thing, granting that it really *was* a gravity battery —something that another part of his mind was already working out delightful ways

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to check. *Let's see,* he thought, *it could be a genuine gravity battery manufactured as such by human beings engaged in secret government-sponsored anti-gravity research either in this country or elsewhere —there* are *such projects— though then how it should get into Aunt Wycherly's basement seems to require very weird assumptions. Or else— my God, this gets fantastic— it could come from off this earth and have been manufactured by extra-terrestrials— got to consider* every *possibility—though that involves us in even more weird assumptions.*

Or it could just have happened. I mean the battery could have started out as an ordinary battery, but sitting here in Aunt Wycherly's basement and undergoing all sorts of rhythmical temperature changes and God knows what else, the chemicals in it could have been transformed into substances generating a current—gravitic, magnetic, how should I know what jargon to use?—that in turn creates a gravitic field. Like spontaneous combustion, or something. Old rags. That's not unusual.

Or it could all be illusion or freak air currents.

Or I could just be going nuts—that's something to keep in mind too.

But while Ronald was making his brain hammer out these possibilities, another section of his thoughts was darting around like kittens to investigate all sorts of wonderful ideas, making use of the thirty years' rag-tag accumulation of information in Ronald's mind—a quite remarkable and varied assortment. For one thing he was thinking that since this basement phenomenon behaved so much like magnetism, it must be a dipolar gravity field he had here, promising both positive and negative gravity if properly harnessed; that is, not only gravitic attraction but gravitic repulsion—in other words, antigravity, the secret of rocketless-spaceflight! There were ways to check that, of course. And what *was* the wonderful stuff that flowed through the wire and made the field grab and the motes spin? Gravitic fluid, could you call it? Liquid gravity? Was it particles, like electrons? Gravitrons, would you call them? Hell, nobody really understood electricity yet! Still—

"Ronald, why are you taking so long? Mr. Espy will be coming soon and I don't want

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to have to watch for him at the window."

Ronald looked down at his aunt's pudgy, thin-lipped face, realizing that she had come creaking and clumping all the way down to the basement without his being aware of it. He nodded slowly at her without a word, put away the battery he was holding, and like a man in a dream began to make the last connections in the bell system.

The bell rang strongly at the first test. Mrs. Wycherly thanked Ronald profusely in the kitchen and seemed on the point of bringing up some additional matter, but just then Ronald rather abruptly wandered off toward the garage, still acting like a man in a dream.

Mrs. Wycherly made a little humorous face. She'd been debating giving Ronald two dollars for his labors and had almost decided to, but if he chose to go mooning off that way . . .

She was still wondering, too, why he had so carefully put one of her batteries into the inside breast pocket of his coat, buttoning the coat afterwards. It was almost like a psychiatric symptom, with some deep symbolic meaning —perhaps she should ask Mr. Espy about it. But no, Ronald probably just wanted it for something in the garage. Well, she wouldn't grudge it to him, though of course he ought to have asked her first.

Convincing himself that his find really was a gravity battery occupied Ronald most of the night and next day. He made his tests with great care, only after thinking each through in detail first, he kept them as few and brief as his delight and wonder would let him. The possibility of the battery running down had begun to prey on his mind more and more seriously, especially after a search of the basement next morning revealed no more dry cells of similar appearance.

The chief test, or rather set of tests, involved making a coil of the wire joining the terminals, so as to give direction and greater power to the gravitic field, exactly as one would do in making an electromagnet. The most obvious and interesting cylinder around which to wind the coil was the battery itself. Ronald started out with just a dozen loops, winding the wire down the body of the battery from one terminal and returning it through the air to the other.

The result was more than gratifying. *Held terminals-*

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end-up the battery almost doubled in weight as soon as he connected the coil. Of course he was just judging the weight by feel, but he was sure he couldn't be fooling himself to that degree. Moreover, the coils strained toward the floor in that position, tending to creep along the cylinder and bunch together. (In later tests he made a point of anchoring them individually with adhesive tape.)

Held terminals-end-down the battery weighed almost nothing at all. It seemed as light as if it were a painted balsa-wood model of itself. The transition from twice-weight to no-weight, as felt by his hand, was as mysteriously alarming and delightful as a mild electric shock.

Clearly the gravitic field was dipolar as he'd surmised. The terminal-end was the negative or repulsive pole, seeking to push away from the earth—or push the earth away! The other end was the positive or attractive one. (A bit later he discovered what he told himself he should have guessed at once: that if he wound the coil the opposite way, say clockwise instead of counter-clockwise, it reversed the poles—they really had nothing to do with the location of the terminals on the battery.)

For light objects nearby, the battery's tiny gravitic field was more powerful than that of the earth—a circumstance that shouldn't surprise him, Ronald reminded himself, as earth's center of gravity was 4,000 miles away while the battery's was right in his hand. The attractive pole would snatch a cork off the floor from the height of two feet—he could actually see the cork falling upward faster and faster—while the repulsive pole would bat away the same cork dropped on it from above. And the attractive pole always became covered with dust when used, while the other pole stayed clean.

Brought close to his forearm, the repulsive pole made a shallow, saucer-shaped dimple in the flesh, while the attractive one tugged at the tissue in a way that somehow felt deeper than suction.

It was vastly exciting to say the very least, and Ronald could hardly wait to step up the power of the field by increasing the number of turns in the coil—this being one of the times when his delight and wonder got the better of him.

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However, he retained at least minimal prudence and added only six turns. He told himself that if the effect wasn't enough, he could always add more.

He was glad that he had been conservative. The repulsive pole was downward when he touched the return wire to the second terminal, and the battery tugged his hand sharply upward, as if it were, not a small, but say a *medium-size* bird trying to escape. Or maybe a weather balloon. The sensation was peculiarly delightful — his hand was not only tugged but indescribably tickled (presumably by the curving components of the dipolar gravitic field)—and despite his concern about the battery running down, it was all Ronald could do not to stand there all night holding the up-surging battery with a happy, dazed smile on his face.

And in fact Ronald did not disconnect it right away. He'd got the impression that the wire of the coil had changed color in some way and on an impulse he switched off the light he'd been working by, a hanging and unshaded 150-watt globe (which he kept secret from his aunt, for she had a thing about wasting electricity and kept nothing stronger than 40 watts in her whole mansion).

The consequences were sudden, spectacular, and almost disastrous.

In the darkness the coil was outlined in bright white light.

Ronald was so startled that he opened his hand.

The white-spiraled battery sprang upward and for an instant Ronald had the dreadful fear that the thing had got away from him forever, and from the earth too, although he knew very well that the ceiling of his garage apartment must stop it.

But then almost immediately, without touching the ceiling, the thing flipped over, dove down, and hit the floor with a sharp crack.

Its light went out.

Ronald's feelings were intense and mixed. He was relieved that the battery hadn't escaped, doubly relieved to discover that apparently it couldn't escape from earth—that released repulsive pole down it would simply flip over and dive. (There was the possibility that he had started the battery flipping over with a twist of his hand when he released it, but that possibility didn't bulk large in his mind.)

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And of course, beyond all else, he was fearful that the fall had somehow ruined the battery forever. For instance, if its ability to generate gravitic energy depended on some rare and delicate spontaneous chemical transformation that had taken place inside it, then even something as slight as a sudden jar might well reverse the transformation.

He switched on the light and picked up the battery as if it were a wounded bird. He was considerably relieved to find that the wire had jarred loose from one of the terminals. He reconnected it, the battery surged in his hand, and his relief was complete.

But thereafter his carefulness was doubled and also tainted with suspicion.

He made a number of other interesting discoveries about the battery besides the epiphenomenon of the white glow. For instance, it turned out to be the *insulation* on the wire that carried the gravitic current. A bare copper wire didn't work at all. A nylon cord worked beautifully, provided he wrapped it in tinfoil so that it didn't short itself out. In fact, there seemed to be a half dozen new sciences implicit in the battery and Ronald would have liked nothing better than to spend the next six months in investigating them all, provided he had a dozen batteries to work with, or even just one to hold in reserve.

That was the fly in the ointment, of course. His battery was goose and golden egg rolled into one, a bird in the hand but none at all in the bushes. So about the middle of the next afternoon he sat down to do some serious, really serious thinking—meaning of course thinking about how he could use his great discovery to profit himself.

First he carefully locked away the battery and went out into the garden to meditate it through, but he found he couldn't bear to be that far away from his find, so he went back to his garage apartment and sat beside the window that looked into the garden, feeling a little giddy from lack of sleep.

His aunt had noted his abstracted and somewhat agitated behavior, however, from one of her lace-curtained watch-windows, just as she'd early that morning been aware of him poking around in the basement without her permission. She frowned, remembering his distinctly odd behavior with her battery. She hadn't discussed the mat-

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ter with Mr. Espy yesterday but she decided she certainly would tonight.

Serious thinking is always apt to be a somewhat chilling business. The more Ronald applied his mind to the problem of how to make *money* out of one small and presumably irreplacable gravitic and antigravitic battery, the chillier the prospects came to look to him.

One thing he was fatalistically certain of from the start: that if he reported his find to any "proper authorities" (military, scientific, industrial, academic, governmental—authorities are always governmental to the end) he would get nothing whatever for himself except trouble. To begin with—the governmental authorities would know very well whether one of their secret projects had or had not started to manufacture gravitic batteries. In either case they would grab the battery—either for safekeeping or for feverish secret research into its mysteries—and at the same time loudly proclaim that it did not exist. Ronald's protests would be laughed at. He would be left out in the cold or, more likely, grabbed himself and awarded a lifetime of protective custody and unending interrogation. Where a discovery of such fabulous military importancee as antigravity was concerned, an individual's rights just wouldn't count.

Perhaps he could investigate the battery himself, carefully open it and find out what made it work? Ronald's reaction to this idea was simply to shudder. True, he fancied a bit his talent for scientific thinking, but he wasn't *that* egotistical. Cutting or prying the battery open in hope of discovering its secrets struck Ronald as some seven degrees more unpromising than an infant taking apart a gold wristwatch to find out what made it work. This seemed particularly to the point as Ronald now inclined more and more to the theory that the battery was something that had been spontaneously generated in his aunt's basement by complex cycles of temperature change or the like—which also brought him back once more to the fact that he only had *one* battery, that as far as he knew there was only one on Earth. And if *that* were the case, why the chances were that the properest scientific authorities in the world wouldn't be any too successful in probing the battery's

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secrets. They'd play with it—at a little more sophisticated level than himself, to be sure—until its power gave out, and then dissect it into microscopic slides and peer and poke at it, and like as not end up knowing little or nothing more than at the first testing.

These general considerations also made Ronald shy away from the plan of finding and privately enlisting the services of some brilliant young technician or engineering student, or offering such a person a partnership in the battery.

Perhaps he could *sell* the battery? No, any substantial businessman would be fearfully suspicious of such an offer. He'd think it was the Keeley motor over again or some perpetual motion crank or the powder that added to water makes gasoline. Ronald could arrange brilliant demonstrations, of course, but the more brilliant they were the more his prospect would suspect trickery. Experts would have to be called in and he would be back once more with the proper authorities, who would be snatching at his battery with rapacious fingers.

Suppose he were to find a millionaire gambler and bet him that — Ronald irritably shook his head. In the first place he didn't know any such gamblers or how to approach them and in the second place the last thing a Bet-a-million Gates would bet on was something that looked like a cast-iron certainty to win. The maker of such a tempting offer would be bound to have something up his sleeve.

Maybe he could use the battery to put on a magic or spiritualist act? Causing something to float without wires, or levitating small objects in a slightly darkened room for the edification of wealthy crackpots like his aunt—do the Poltergeist bit. Now that, Ronald told himself, was cutting his problem down close to size. The trouble was, of course, as with so many other plans, that the battery would eventually run down and probably sooner than later. But more than that, the magic-act plan ran up against the objection that Ronald simply wasn't even a passable third-rate showman or conman and knew it very well.

Sitting in his chilly hole-over-a-garage and gazing out at the darkening garden—for a full twenty-four hours had passed since his great discovery—Ronald gave an irritated little sigh. His utter incapacity as a showman and conman was an old sore point with him.

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Why, as long as ten years ago he'd been the one to get his aunt interested in occultism, but had he reaped any of the benefits of her craze? No! That had been reserved for the slick operators like Mr. Espy, Dr. Yorn, and their dozen or so predecessors. They'd taken hundreds, thousands of dollars from her over the years. She'd even sent money by mail to Tibet, Ceylon and Southern California "to further occult research," while he, who'd started the whole thing, was lucky if from time to time he got a few cans of corned beef hash or spaghetti from her pantry hoard!

Not that Ronald lay awake nights scheming how to murder his aunt without being suspected or how to defraud her on a large scale. He wasn't that sort of person at all. He just grieved occasionally that a man with a commanding gaze and a confident pseudo-professional manner should be able to charm a twenty-dollar bill out of someone else's pocket and into his own, while he, with ten times the education, ingenuity, and honest idealism, couldn't!

Now if I just had the kind of cheap ability that a Yorn or an Espy has, Ronald told himself, *I'd figure out a dozen childishly simple ways to profit from this battery and, what's more important, I'd have the nerve and know-how to put them into action.*

He shook his head and shivered. He'd just had a vision of himself, days or months hence, the battery completely dead, finally going to the "proper authorities" with a crazed gleam in his eyes and assuring them that, yes, once this battery had held gravitic energy . . .

What I obviously need, he told himself, *is an improper authority.*

His gaze lit on Mr. Espy and his aunt talking at the far end of the garden. Almost at once his aunt went inside and Mr. Espy lit a cigarette and began to stroll.

Normally Ronald was anything but a man of action, but sleeplessness and desperation had transformed him. He grabbed the battery and completed the connection. It glowed brilliantly and surged powerfully upward in his hand, the coil consisting now of some twenty turns of tinfoil-wrapped nylon. Ronald headed for the garden.

Strike while the iron is hot, he told himself exultantly. *Espy's my man. With this to show him and let him feel it won't take me twenty seconds*

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to make my pitch. And with his conning ability and my battery . . .

Ronald certainly did make an arresting sight as he hurried through the darkening garden, holding high his glowing hand. Mr. Espy stopped dead and stared at Ronald.

There was something peculiar about the stare, though. It seemed to Ronald to go through him like a knife. Intending to startle, Ronald found himself startled in return . . . momentarily almost paralyzed.

He realized with horror that the battery had sprung from his limp fingers.

He waited for it to flip over and crash, thanking God that the ground was soft.

It didn't flip over. Buzzing faintly now and seeming to spin, it bulleted straight upward at ever-increasing velocity, one more bright point of light headed toward the first stars of evening.

It faded and was gone forever.

Ronald realized that Mr. Espy had hold of his shoulder and was shaking him.

"Young man!" Mr. Espy was saying, "Do you realize that you possess astounding occult powers? That was the most impressive demonstration of telekinesis I have ever witnessed in a long and rather far-flung life!"

Lieutenant J. C. Arnold and S. Abramson, USAF, were on a routine jet mission at 30,000 feet when the phenomenon shot by them at a distance of only a few yards, its velocity now considerable.

"Jack, a meteor!" the second gasped.

"Be your age, Sammy," the first admonished him. "Would a shooting star shoot up?" He paused before adding, "But what could it have been?"

Rather later that evening Mr. Espy was preparing a sort of telegram for transmission, though not by Western Union. It read in part:

> You will also be pleased to hear that the last of the batteries the saintly Yorn absent-mindedly distributed around in his chuckle-headed way before he was reassigned to a less critical post, has been located and safely disposed of. It is no longer on Earth. One worry less for all of us! To get it away painlessly from the young human who had discovered it and was beginning to probe its more superficial powers, I was forced to employ what on this planet

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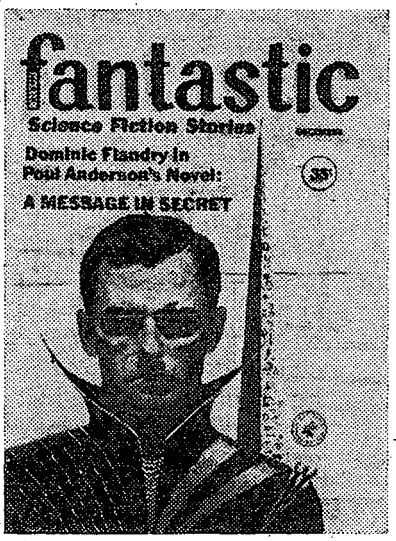
they quaintly called "the whammy." He was most startled and considerably grieved to see the battery star-trend, having apparently not anticipated all the consequences of the gyral effect or the cube law on the coils. I calmed him and reconciled him in part to his loss without having to wipe his memory.

So . . . our observation station on Sol Three is once more reasonably secure from discovery. It will not be necessary now to find new patrons—we can continue to depend for local financing on Mrs. Wycherly and the other ladies who unknowingly but so very kindly support our little enterprise.

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH

A blockbuster of a novel by POUL ANDERSON headlines The December issue of Fantastic Magazine.



Devil-may-care Galactic investigator Dominic Flandry has the adventure of his career in *A Message in Secret*, as he copes with several sets of enemies on one of the strangest planets in the universe.

Backing up Anderson is *The Clone*, by **Theodore L. Thomas,** a science-cum-horror short story that combines one of the most original s-f plots we've seen in a long time, with a taut style that literally brings catastrophe into your kitchen sink.

I, Gardener, by **Allen Kim Lang,** is a short story that could stand on its own—yet to s-f initiates, it will have an extra hidden meaning.

Several other short stories and all the usual features round out the December FANTASTIC. It will be on sale at your newsdealer's Nov. 19. Reserve your copy now.

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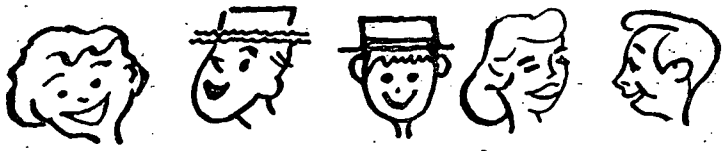

According to you...

Dear Editor:

I found to my dismay, that the August issue of *Fantastic* just didn't seem to have the higher quality work of a few months ago. The editorial was interesting, but too small. I just start to read the thing when, poof, it's finished. You should enlarge it to at least two pages.

The lead story by Fritz Leiber, "Damnation Morning," in my opinion, was one of the worst stories I've ever read in *Fantastic*. I had the gimmick ending figured out before the story was one-third through. And the whole thing seemed hastily shoved together with no characterization or motivation whatsoever. Mr. Leiber can do much better than this, I'm sure.

That Jack Sharkey is going places. No matter how old the plot gimmick is, he seems to add a much needed vitality to it.

Another feature that's too short to be worthwhile is the letter column. If you must keep the classified ad section isn't there some way for a bigger letter column?

William Brooks
Detachment 2
Air Force Institute of Technology
Yale University, New Haven, Conn.

• *Bigger editorials, more letters? That means fewer stories. We think you'd rather read writers than editors.*

Dear Editor:

I'm an underfed bookworm with a six-year-old addiction to science fiction, and no place within miles to acquire it. I was just donated about 200 back number mags to add to my collection of about 400 science fiction magazines, which proves I have the right kind of friends. But if I could only get the kids

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to cooperate and go barefooted I'd have enough cash to subscribe to a few magazines and read some fresh ones.

Anyhow, my contribution to literature in this column is about the people who write in to complain that s-f is "trash" etc. I think the Russians have them tagged right, as Pasternak says in his book, "They were unaware that such dramatic excesses, far from showing their warmth and breadth of character, expressed intellectual poverty."

Now that I've written a letter and taken part, as well as collecting and reading, can I call myself a genuine Fan-worm?

Elaine Rambo
Osage Beach, Missouri

● *Consider yourself a Grand Exalted Fan-worm. And you know worms often exist in Fen.*

Dear Editor:

While scanning—and reading—some back issues of a competitive magazine (name withheld) I observed on the concluding page of one of the issues, a short vignette titled, appropriately, *Letters to the Editor*, written by a certain young freshman at the University of California, Ron Goulart.

Next year, up pops Goulart in the same mag, with a short story this time. The editors proclaim Goulart in a class of his own. A class of distinction. It was subtly hinted that Goulart would rise to great heights in the future.

Several weeks afterwards, I received the August issue of *Fantastic*. I read your magazine with avid enthusiasm. All the stories were good, especially good.

One of the stories was written with a quirkish ending, not exactly morbid. A story by Goulart. His story, I feel, was above average for your magazine, or for that matter, any other mag.

As for the magazine as a whole, one of the best. The authors in the August issue came up with some particularly witty—and dead-pan?—endings.

Like most fans, I have my favorites. Like to see more of Goulart, Chandler, Porges and Sharkey. Try and get some stories or novelets by some other writers: Galouye, Budrys or Anderson, maybe?

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It's good to know that at least there is one magazine that is not filled with the same old bore and gore.

Glen Christianson
30012 Champin Dr.
St. Clair Shores, Mich.

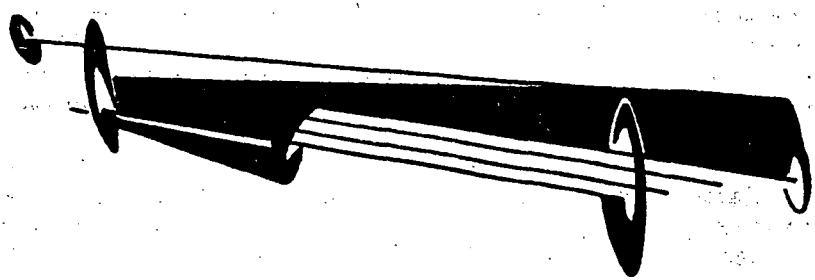
• *Anderson coming up with a novelet next month.*

Dear Editor:

Do you believe in mental connections between people such as often read s-f magazines, where two people hit on the same name or important discovery at the same time? It happens in real life many times, and is stranger than fiction when it occurs. Take the story "Man Under Glass" which appears in the August issue of *Fantastic*—I refer only to the title. Could two writers conceive of it at the same time? Two entirely different stories, one science fiction, one non s-f, now bear that name. I wrote the one your readers didn't see. An excerpt from my story and an illustration were published in a Richmond College newspaper of limited circulation as part of a fiction writing contest and appeared April 30th of this year. I am sure some form of parapsychological connection took place and would like to hear from the author. Did we have a mental connection?

H. R. Frye
408 Alleghany Rd.
Hampton, Va.

• *To our way of thinking it's just coincidence, but maybe Author Evelyn Goldstein will recall a psychic blast, now that you mention it.*



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TRANQUILITY, OR ELSE!

Beware of too much peace and quiet! It might turn out that going off your rocker is the only thing worth doing when self-expression is taboo and depersonalization becomes the current rage.

My strangest case, bar none, from the Psychotic Years was the Green Demon of New Angeles.
—from the notebooks of
Andreas Snowden

IT WOULD be hard to imagine a more peaceful and reassuring spot, a spot less likely to harbor or attract horrors, even in America of the tranquil Early Twenty-first Century, than the suburb-exurb—rather—of Civil Service Knolls. Cozy was the word for the place—a loose assembly of a half thousand homes snuggling down in the warm moonlight a mountain ridge away from the metropolis of New Angeles. With their fashionably rounded roofs the individual houses looked rather like giant mushrooms among the noble trees. They were like mushrooms too in the way they grew with the families they housed—one storey for the newlyweds, two for the properly childrened and community - seasoned, three for those punchdrunk with reproduction and happy living. From under their eaves spilled soft yellow light of the exact shade that color analysts had pronounced most homelike.

There were no streets or roads, only the dark pine-scented asphalt disks of side-yard landing spots now holding the strange-vaned shapes of copters and flutteryplanes locked for the night, like sleeping dragonflies and moths. While for the ground-minded there was the unobtrusive subway entrance. Even the gro-

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ceries came by underground tube straight to the kitchen in response to the housewife's morning dialing, delivery having at last gone underground with the other utilities. Well-chewed garbage vanished down rust-proof ducts in the close company of well-bred bacteria. There were not even any unsightly dirt paths worn in the thick springy lawns—the family hypnotherapist had implanted in the mind of every resident, each last baldie and toddler, the suggestion that pedestrians vary their routes and keep their steps light and rather few.

No nightclubs, no bars, no feelie pads, no mess parlors, no bongo haunts, no jukebox joints, no hamburg havens, no newsstands, no comic books, no smellorama, no hot-rods, no weed, no jazz, no gin.

Yes, tranquil, secure and cosy were all good words for Civil Service Knolls—a sylvan monument to sane, civilized, progressive attitudes.

Yet fear was about to swoop there just the same. Not fear of war, missile-atomic or otherwise—the Cold Truce with Communism was a good fifty years old. Not fear of physical disease or any crippling organic infirmity—such ills were close to the vanishing point and even funerals and deaths—again with the vital aid of the family hypnotherapist—were rather pleasant or at least reassuring occasions for the survivors. No, the fear that was about to infiltrate Civil Service Knolls was of the sort that must be called nameless.

A householder crossing a stretch of open turf as he strolled home from the subway thought he heard a *whish* directly overhead. There was nothing whatever blackly silhouetted against the wide stretch of moon-pale sky, yet it seemed to him that one of the moon-dimmed stars near the zenith quivered and shifted, as if there were an *eddy* in the air or sky. Heaven had wavered. And weren't there two extra stars there now?—two new stars in the center of the eddy—two dim red stars close-placed like eyes?

No, that was impossible, he must be seeing things—his own blasted fault for missing his regular soothe-session with the hypnotherapist! Just the same, he hurried his steps.

The eddy in the darkness overhead floated in pace with him a while, then swooped. He heard a louder *whish,* then something brushed his shoulder and claws seemed to fasten there for an instant.

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It was a rude awakening for Judistrator Wisant—his daughter had flipped.

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He gasped like someone about to vomit and leaped forward frantically.

From the empty moon-glowing darkness behind him came a cackle of grim laughter.

While the householder desperately pounded upon his own front door, the eddy in the darkness shot up to the height of a sequoia, then swooped on another section of Civil Service Knolls. It hovered for a while above the imposing two-story residence of Judistrator Wisant, took a swing around the three-story one of Securitor Harker, but in the end drifted down to investigate a faintly glowing upstairs window in another three-storey house.

Inside the window an athletically-handsome matron, mother of five, was leisurely preparing for bed. She was thinking, rather self-satisfiedly, that (1) she had completed all preparations for her family's participation in the Twilight Tranquility Festival tomorrow, high point of the community year; (2) she had thrown just the right amount of cold water on her eldest daughter's infatuation for the unsuitable boy visiting next door (and a hint to the hypnotherapist before her daughter's next session would do the rest); and (3) she truly didn't look five years older than her eldest daughter.

There was a tap at the window.

The matron started, pulling her robe around her, then craftily waved off the light. It had instantly occurred to her that the unsuitable boy might have had the audacity to try to visit her daughter illicitly and have mistaken bedroom windows—she had read in magazine articles that such wild lascivious young men actually existed in parts of America, though—thank Placidity!—not as regular residents of Civil Service Knolls.

She walked to the window and abruptly waved it to full transparency and then with a further series of quick sidewise waves brought the room's lights to photoflood brilliance.

At first she saw nothing but the thick foliage of the sycamore a few yards outside.

Then it seemed to her as if there were an *eddy* in the massed greenery. The leaves seemed to shift and swirl.

Then a face appeared in the eddy—a green face with the fanged grin of a devil and hotly glowing eyes that looked like twin peepholes into Hell.

The matron screamed, spun around, and sprinted into the hall, shouting the local secu-

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rity number toward the phone which her scream triggered into ear-straining awareness.

From beyond the window came peals of cold maniacal laughter.

Yes, fear had come to Civil Service Knolls—in fact, horror would hardly be too strong a term.

Some men lead perfect lives
—poor devils!
—the notebooks of A.S.

Judistrator Wisant was awakened by a familiar insistent tingling in his left wrist. He reached out and thumbed a button. The tingling stopped. The screen beside the bed glowed into life with the handsome hatchet-face of his neighbor Securitor Harker. He touched another button, activating the tiny softspeaker and micromike relays at his ear and throat.

"Go ahead, Jack," he murmured.

Two seconds after his head had left the pillow a faint light had sprung from the walls of the room. It increased now by easy stages as he listened to a terse second-hand account of the two most startling incidents to disturb Civil Service Knolls since that tragic episode ten years ago when the kindergarten hypnotherapist went crazy and called attention to her psychosis only by the shocking posthypnotic suggestions she implanted in the toddlers' minds.

Judistrator Wisant was a large, well-built, shaven-headed man. His body, half covered now by the lapping sheet, gave the impression of controlled strength held well in reserve. His hands were big and quiet. His face was a compassionate yet disciplined mask of sanity. No one ever met him and failed to be astounded when they learned afterwards that it was his wife Beth who had been the aberrating school hypnotherapist and who was now a permanent resident of the nearby mental hospital of Serenity Shoals.

The bedroom was as bare and impersonal as a gymnasium locker room. Screen, player, two short bedside shelves of which one was filled with books and tapes and neatly stacked papers, an uncurtained darkened windoor leading to a small outside balcony and now set a little ajar, the double bed itself exactly half slept in—that about completed the inventory, except for two 3-D photographs on the other bedside shelf of two smiling, tragic-eyed women who looked enough alike to be sisters of about 27 and 17. The photo-

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graph of the elder bore the inscription, "To my Husband, With all my Witchy Love. Beth," and of the younger, "To her Dear Daddikins from Gabby."

The topmost of the stacked papers was a back cover cut from a magazine demurely labeled *Individuality Unlimited: Monthly Bulletin.* The background was a cluster of shadowy images of weird and grim beings: vampires, werewolves, humanoid robots, witches, murderesses, "Martians," mask-wearers, naked brains with legs. A central banner shouted: *Next Month: Accent the Monster in You!* In the lower lefthand corner was a small sharp photo of a personable young man looking mysterious, with the legend *David Cruxon: Your Monster Mentor.* Clipped to the page was a things-to-do-tomorrow memo in Joel Wisant's angular script: "10 ack emma: Individuality Unlimited hearing. Warn them on injunction."

Wisant's gaze shifted more than once to this item and to the two photographs as he patiently heard out Harker's account. Finally he said, "Thanks, Jack. No, I don't think it's a prankster—what Mr. Fredericks and Mrs. Ames report seeing is no joke-shop scare - your - friends illusion. And I don't think it's anything that comes in any way from Serenity Shoals, though the overcrowding there *is* a problem and we're going to have to do something about it. What's that? No, it's nobody fooling around in an antigravity harness—they're too restricted. And we know it's nothing from *outside*—that's impossible. No, the real trouble, I'm afraid, is that it's nothing at all—nothing material. Does the name Mattoon mean anything to you?

"I'm not surprised, it was a hundred years ago. But a town went mad because of an imaginary prowler, there was an epidemic of insane fear. That sort of thing happening today could be much worse. Are you familiar with Report K?

"No matter, I can give you the gist of it. You're cleared for it and ought to have it. But you *are* calling on our private line, aren't you?—this stuff is top restricted.

"Report K is simply the *true* annual statistics on mental health in America. Adjusted ones showing no significant change have been issued through the usual channels. Jack, *the real incidence of new psychoses is up 15 percent in the last eight months.* Yes, it

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is pretty staggering and I *am* a close-mouthed old dog. No, it's been pretty well proved that it isn't nerve-viruses or mind-war, much as the Kremlin boys would like to see us flip and despite those irrational but persistent rumors of a Mind Bomb. Analysis is not complete, but the insanity-surge seems to be due to a variety of causes—things that we've let get out of hand and must deal with drastically."

As Wisant said those last words he was looking at the Accent-the-Monster banner on the Individuality Unlimited bulletin. His hand took a stylus, crossed out the "Warn them on" in his memo, underlined "injunction" three times and added an exclamation point.

Meanwhile he continued, "As far as Mr. Fredericks and Mrs. Ames are concerned, here's your procedure. First, instruct them to tell no one about what they thought they saw—tell them it's for the public safety—and direct them to see their hypnotherapists. Same instructions to family members and anyone to whom they may have talked. Second, find the names of their hypnotherapists, call *them* and tell them to get in touch with Dr. Andreas Snowden at Serenity Shoals—he's up on Report K and will know what reassurance - techniques or memory-wiping to advise. I depend on Snowden a lot—for that matter he's going to be with us tomorrow when we go up against Individuality Unlimited. Third, don't let anything leak to the press—that's *vital.* We must confine this outbreak of delusions before any others are infected. I don't have to tell you, Jack, that I have reason to feel very deeply about a thing like this." (His gaze went to the photo of his wife.) "That's right, Jack, we're sanitary engineers of the mind, you and I—we hose out mental garbage!"

A rather frosty smile came into his face and stayed there while he listened again to Harker.

After a bit he said, "No, I wouldn't think of missing the Tranquility Festival—in fact they've got me leading part of it. Always proud to—and these community occasions are very important in keeping people sane. Gabby?—she's looking forward to it, too, as only a pretty, sweet-minded girl of 17 can, who's been chosen Tranquility Princess. She really makes it for me. And now hop to it, Jack, while this old man grabs himself some more shut-eye. Remember that what you're up

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against is delusions and hallucinations, *nothing real.*"

Wisant thumbed off the phone. As his head touched the pillow and the light in the room started to die, he nodded twice, as if to emphasize his last remark.

Serenity Shoals, named with a happy unintended irony, is a sizable territory in America's newest frontier: the Mountains of Madness.
—the notebooks of A.S.

While the scant light that filtered past the windoor died, the eddy in the darkness swung away from the house of Judistrator Wisant and sped with a kind of desperation toward the sea. The houses and lawns gave out. The wooded knolls became lower and sandier and soon gave way to a wide treeless expanse of sand holding a half dozen large institutional buildings and a tent-city besides. The buildings were mostly dark, but with stripes of dimly lit windows marking stairwells and corridors; the tent-city likewise had its dimly lit streets. Beyond them both the ghostly breakers of the Pacific were barely visible in the moonlight.

Serenity Shoals, which has been called a Sandbox for Grownups, was one of Twenty-first Century America's largest mental hospitals and now it was clearly filled beyond any planned capacity. Here dwelt the garden-variety schizos, manics, paranoids, brain-damageds, a few exotic sufferers from radiation-induced nerve sickness and spaceflight-gendered gravitational dementia and cosmic shock, and a variety of other special cases—but really all of them were simply the people who for one reason or another found it a better or at least more bearable bargain to live with their imaginings rather than even pretend to live with what society called reality.

Tonight Serenity Shoals was restless. There was more noise, more laughter and chatter and weeping, more movement of small lights along the corridors and streets, more shouts and whistles, more unscheduled night-parties and night-wanderings of patients and night-expeditions of aides, more beetle-like scurryings of sand-cars with blinking headlights, more emergencies of all sorts. It may have been the general overcrowding, or the new batch of untrained nurses and aides, or the rumor that lobotomies were being performed again, or the two new snackbars. It may even have been the moonlight—Luna dis-

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turbing the "loonies" in the best superstitious tradition.

For that matter, it may have been the eddy in the darkness that was the cause of it all.

Along the landward side of Serenity Shoals, between it and the wasteland bordering Civil Service Knolls, stretched a bright new wire fence, unpleasantly but not lethally electrified—one more evidence that Serenity Shoals was having to cope with more than its quota.

Back and forth along the line of the fence, though a hundred yards above, the eddy in the darkness beat and whirled, disturbing the starlight. There was an impression of hopeless yearning about its behavior, as if it wanted to reach its people but could not pass over the boundary.

From the mangy terrace between the permanent buildings and the nominally temporary tents, Director Andreas Snowden surveyed his schizo-manic domain. He was an elderly man with sleepy eyes and unruly white hair. He frowned, sensing an extra element in the restlessness tonight. Then his brow cleared, and smiling with tender cynicism, he recited to himself:

"Give me your tired, your
poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teaming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me."

Apply a lot more to Serenity Shoals, he thought *than to America these days. Though I ain't no bloody copper goddess bearing a lamp to dazzle the Dagos and I ain't got no keys to no golden doors.* (Dr. Snowden was always resolutely crude and ungrammatical in his private thoughts, perhaps in reaction to the relative gentility of his spoken utterances. He was also very sentimental.)

"Oh, hello, Doctor!" The woman darting across the corner of the terrace had stopped suddenly. It was hard to see anything about her except that she was thin.

Dr. Snowden walked toward her. "Good evening, Mrs. Wisant," he said. "Rather late for you to be up and around, isn't it?"

"I know, Doctor, but the thought-rays are very thick tonight and they sting worse than the mosquitoes. Besides I'm too excited I couldn't sleep anyhow. My daughter is coming here tomorrow."

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"Is she?" Dr. Snowden asked gently. "Odd that Joel hasn't mentioned it to me—as it happens, I'm to see your husband tomorrow on a legal matter."

"Oh, Joel doesn't know she's coming," the lady assured him. "He'd never let her if he did. He doesn't think I'm good for her ever since I started blacking out on my visits home and . . . doing things. But it isn't a plot between me and Gabby, either—*she* doesn't know she's coming."

"So? Then how are you going to manage it, Mrs. Wisant?"

"Don't try to sound so normal, Doctor!—especially when you know very well *I'm not*. I suppose *you* think that *I* think I will summon her by sending a thought-ray. Not at all. I've practically given up using thought-rays. They're not reliable and they carry yellow fever. No, Doctor, I got Gabby to come here tomorrow ten years ago."

"Now how did you do that, Mrs. Wisant? Time travel?"

"Don't be so patronizing! I merely impressed it on Gabby's mind ten years ago—after all, I *am* a trained hypnotherapist—that she should come to me when she became a princess. Now Joel writes me she's been chosen Tranquility Princess for the festival tomorrow. You see?"

"Very interesting. But don't be disappointed if—"

"Stop being a wet blanket, Doctor! Don't you have any trust in psychological techniques? I *know* she's coming. Oh the daisies, the beautiful daisies . . ."

"Then that settles it. How are they treating you here these days?"

"I have no complaints, Doctor—except I must say I don't like all these new nurses and aides. They're callow. They seem to think it's very queer of us to be crazy."

Dr. Snowden chuckled. "Some people are narrow-minded," he agreed.

"Yes, and so gullible, Doctor. Just this afternoon two of the new nurses were goggling over a magazine ad about how people should improve their personalities by becoming monsters. I ask you!"

Dr. Snowden shrugged. "I doubt whether all of us are monster material. And now perhaps you'd better . . ."

"I suppose so. Good night, Doctor."

As she was turning to go, Mrs. Wisant paused to slap her left forearm viciously.

"Thought-ray?" Dr. Snowden asked.

Mrs. Wisant looked at him

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sardonically. "No," she said. "Mosquito!"

Dull security and the dead weight of perfection breed aberration even more surely than disorder and fear.
—the notebooks of A.S.

Gabrielle Wisant, commonly called Gabby though she was anything but that, was sleeping on her back in long pink pajamas, stretched out very straight and with her arms folded across her breasts, looking more like the stone funeral effigy of a girl than a living one—an effect which the unrumpled bedclothes heightened.

The unocculted windoor let in the first cold granular light of dawn. The room was feminine, but without any special character—it seemed secretive. It had one item in common with her father's: on a low bedside stand and next to a pad of pink notepaper was another sliced-off back cover of the Individuality Unlimited bulletin. Close beside the "David Cruxon: Your Monster Mentor" photo there was a note scrawled in green ink.

Gabs— How's this for kicks? Cruxon's Carny! or corny? Lunch with your MM same place but 130 pip emma. Big legal morning. Tell you then, Dave. (Signed and Sealed in the Monsterarium, 4 pip emma, 15 June)

The page was bowed up as if something about ten inches long were lying under it.

Gabrielle Wisant's eyes opened, though not another muscle of her moved, and they stayed that way, directed at the ceiling.

And then . . . then nothing overt happened, but it was as if the mind of Gabrielle Wisant—or the soul or spirit, call it what you will—rose from unimaginable depths to the surface of her eyes to take a long look around, like a small furtive animal that silently mounts to the mouth of its burrow to sniff the weather, ready to duck back at the slightest sudden noise or apprehension of danger—in fact, rather like the ground-hog come up to see or not to see its shadow on Candlemas Day.

With a faculty profounder than physical sight, the mind of Gabby Wisant took a long questioning look around at her world—the world of a "pretty, sweet-minded girl of 17"—to decide if it were worth living in.

Sniffing the weather of America, she became aware of a country of suntanned, slimmed-down people with smooth-

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ed-out minds, who fed contentedly on decontaminated news and ads and inspiration pieces, like hamsters on a laboratory diet. *But what were they after? What did they do for kicks? What happened to the ones whose minds wouldn't smooth, or smoothed too utterly?*

She saw the sane, civilized, secure, superior community of Civil Service Knolls, a homestead without screeching traffic or other violence, without jukeboxes or juvenile delinquency, a place of sensible adults and proper children, a place so tranquil it was going to have a Tranquility Festival tonight. *But just beyond it she saw Serenity Shoals with its lost thousands living in brighter darker worlds, including one who had planted posthypnotic suggestions in children's minds like time-bombs.*

She saw a father so sane, so just, so strong, so perfectly controlled, so always right that he was not so much a man as a living statue—the statue she too tried to be every night while she slept. *And what was the statue really like under the marble? What were the heat and color of its blood?*

She saw a witty man named David Cruxon who perhaps loved her, but who was so mixed up between his cynicism and his idealism that you might say he cancelled out. A knight without armor . . . and armor without a knight.

She saw no conventional monsters, no eddies in darkness—her mind had been hiding deep down below all night.

She saw the surface of her own mind, so sweetly smoothed by a succession of kindly hypnotherapists (and one beloved traitor who must not be named) that it was positively frightening, like a book of horrors bound in pink velvet with silk rosebuds, or the sluggish sea before a hurricane or night softly silent before a scream. She wished she had the kind of glass-bottomed boat that would let her peer below, but that was the thing above all else she must not do.

She saw herself as Tranquility Princess some twelve hours hence, receiving the muted ovation under the arching trees, candlelight twinkling back from her flared and sequinned skirt and just one leaf drifted down and caught in her fine-spun hair.

Princess . . . Princess . . . As if that word were some-

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how a signal, the mind of Gabby Wisant made its decision about the worth of the upper world and dove back inside, dove deep deep down. The ground-hog saw its shadow black as ink and decided to dodge the dirty weather ahead.

The *thing* that instantly took control of Gabby Wisant's body when her mind went into hiding treated that body with a savage familiarity, certainly not as if it were a statue. It sprang to its haunches in the center of the bed, snuffing the air loudly. It ripped off the pink pajamas with a complete impatience or ignorance of magnetic clasps. It switched on the lights and occulted the windoor, making it a mirror, and leered approvingly at itself and ran its hands over its torso in fierce caresses. It snatched a knife with a six-inch blade from under the bulletin cover and tried its edge on its thumb and smiled at the blood it drew and sucked it. Then it went through the inner door, utterly silent as to footsteps but breathing in loud, measured gasps like a careless tiger.

When Judistrator Wisant woke, his daughter was squatted beside him on the permanently undisturbed half of his bed, crooning to his scoutmaster's knife. She wasn't looking at him quite, or else she was looking at him sideways—he couldn't tell through the eyelash-blur of his slitted eyes.

He didn't move. He wasn't at all sure he could. He humped the back of his tongue to say "Gabby," but he knew it would come out as a croak and he wasn't even sure he could manage that. He listened to his daughter—the crooning had changed back to faintly gargling tiger-gasps—and he felt the cold sweat trickling down the sides of his face and over his naked scalp and stingingly into his eyes.

Suddenly his daughter lifted the knife high above her head, both hands locked around the hilt, and drove it down into the center of the empty, perfectly mounded pillow beside him. As it thudded home he realized with faint surprise that he hadn't moved although he'd tried to. It was as though he had contracted his muscles convulsively, but discovered that all the tendons had been cut without his knowing.

He lay there quite flaccid, watching his daughter through barely parted eyelids as she mutilated the pillow with slow savage slashes, digging in the point with a

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twist, and sawing off a corner. She must be sweating too—strands of her fine-spun pale gold hair clung wetly to her neck and slim shoulders. She was crooning once more, with a rippling low laugh and a soft growl for variety, and she was drooling a little. The hospital smell of the fresh-cut plastic came to him faintly.

Young male voices were singing in the distance. Judistrator Wisant's daughter seemed to hear them as soon as he did, for she stopped chopping at the pillow and held still, and then she started to sway her head and she smiled and she got off the bed with long easy movements and went to the windoor and thumbed it wide open and stood on the balcony, the knife trailing laxly from her left hand.

The singing was louder now—young male voices rather dutifully joyous in a slow marching rhythm—and now he recognized the tune. It was "America the Beautiful" but the words were different. This verse began,

"Oh beautiful for peaceful minds,
Secure families . . . "

It occurred to Wisant that it must be the youths going out at dawn to gather the boughs and deck the Great Bower, a traditional preparatory step to the Twilight Tranquility Festival. He'd have deduced it instantly if his tendons hadn't been cut . . .

But then he found that he had turned his head toward the balcony and even turned his shoulders and lifted up on one elbow a little and opened his eyes wide.

His daughter put her knife between her teeth and clambered sure-footedly onto the railing and jumped to the nearest sycamore branch and hung there swinging, like a golden-haired, long-legged, naked ape.

"And bring with thee
Tranquility
To Civil Service Knolls."

She swung in along the branch to the trunk and laid her knife in a crotch and braced one foot there and started to swing the other and her free arm too in monkey circles.

He reached out and tried to thumb the phone button, but his hand was shaking in a four-inch arc.

He heard his daughter yell, "Yoohoo! Yoohoo, boys!"

The singing stopped.

Judistrator Wisant half

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scrabbled, half rolled out of bed and hurried shakingly—and he hoped noiselessly—through the door and down the hall and into his daughter's bedroom, shut the door behind him—and locked it, as he only discovered later—and grabbed her phone and punched out Securitor Harker's number.

The man he wanted answered almost immediately, a little cross with sleep.

Wisant was afraid he'd have trouble being coherent at all. He was startled to find himself talking with practically his normal confident authority and winningness.

"Wisant, Jack. Calling from home. Emergency. I need you and your squad on the double. Yes. Pick up Dr. Sims or Armstrong on the way but don't waste time. Oh—and have your men bring ladders. Yes, and put in a quick call to Serenity Shoals for a 'copter. What? *My* authority. What? Jack, I don't want to say it now, I'm not using our private line. Well, all right, just let me think for a minute . . ."

Judistrator Wisant ordinarily never had trouble in talking his way around stark facts. And he wouldn't have had even this time, perhaps, if he hadn't just the moment before seen something that distracted him.

Then the proper twist of phrase came to him.

"Look, Jack," he said, "it's this way: Gabby has gone to join her mother. Get here *fast.*"

He turned off the phone and picked up the disturbing item: the bulletin cover beside his daughter's bed. He read the note from Cruxon twice and his eyes widened and his jaw tightened.

His fear was all gone away somewhere. For the moment *all* his concerns were gone except this young man and his stupid smirking face and stupider title and his green ink.

He saw the pink pad and he picked up a dark crimson stylus and began to write rapidly in a script that was a shade larger and more angular than usual.

For 100 years even breakfast foods have been promoting delirious happiness and glorious peace of mind. To what end?

—the notebooks of A.S.

"Suppose you begin by backgrounding us in on what Individuality Unlimited is and how it came to be? I'm sure we all have a general idea and may know some aspects in de-

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tail, but the bold outline, from management's point of view, should be firmed. At the least it will get us talking."

This suggestion, coming from the judistrator himself, reflected the surface informality of the conference taking place in Wisant's airy chambers in central New LA. Dr. Andreas Snowden sat on the judistrator's right, doodling industriously. Securitor Harker sat on Wisant's left, while flanking the trio were two female secretaries in dark business suits similar to those men wore a century before, though of somewhat shapelier cut and lighter material.

Like all the other men in the room, Wisant was sensibly clad in singlet, business jerkin, Bermuda shorts, and sandals. A folded pink paper sticking up a little from his breast pocket provided the only faintly incongruous detail. He had been just seven minutes late to the conference, perhaps a record for fathers who have seen their daughters 'coptered off to a mental hospital two hours earlier—though only Harker knew of and so could appreciate this iron-man achievement.

A stocky man with shaggy pepper-and-salt hair and pugnacious brows stood up across the table from Wisant.

"Good idea," he said gruffly. "If we're going to be hanged, let's get the ropes around our necks. First I'd better identify us shifty-eyed miscreants. I'm Bob Diskrow, president and general manager." He then indicated the two men on his left: "Mr. Sobody, our vice president in charge of research, and Dr. Gline, IU's chief psychiatrist." He turned to the right: "Miss Rawvetch, vp in charge of presentation—" (A big-boned blonde flashed her eyes. She was wearing a lavender business suit with pearl buttons, wing collar and Ascot tie) "—and Mr. Cruxon, junior vp in charge of the . . . Monster Program." David Cruxon was identifiably the young man of the photograph with the same very dark, crewcut hair and sharply watchful eyes, but now he looked simply haggard rather than mysterious. At the momentary hesitation in Diskrow's voice he quirked a smile as rapid and almost as convulsive as a tic.

"I happen already to be acquainted with Mr. Cruxon," Wisant said with a smile, "though in no fashion prejudicial to my conducting this conference. He and my daughter know each other socially."

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Diskrow cocked an eyebrow at him. Cruxon nodded sharply.

Diskrow stuck his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels reflectively.

Wisant lifted a hand. "One moment," he said. "There are some general considerations governing any judistrative conference of which I should remind us. They are in line with the general principle of government by Commission, Committee and Conference which has done so much to simplify legal problems in our times. This meeting is *private*. Press is excluded, politics are taboo. Any information you furnish about IU will be treated by us as strictly confidential and we trust you will return the courtesy regarding matters we may divulge. And this is a democratic conference. *Any* of us may speak freely.

"The suggestion has been made," Wisant continued smoothly, "that some practices of IU are against the public health and safety. After you have presented your case and made your defense—pardon my putting it that way—I may in my judicial capacity issue certain advisement. If you comply with those, the matter is settled. If you do not, the advisements immediately become injunctions and I, in my administrative capacity, enforce them—though you may work for their removal through the regular legal channels. Understood?"

Diskrow nodded with a wry grimace. "Understood — you got us in a combined hammerlock and body scissors. (Just don't sprinkle us with fire ants!) And now I'll give you that bold outline you asked for—and try to be bold about it."

He made a fist and stuck out a finger from it. "Let's get one thing straight at the start: Individuality Unlimited is no idealistic or mystical outfit with its head in orbit around the moon, and it doesn't pretend to be. We just manufacture and market a product the public is willing to fork out money for. That product is individuality." He rolled the word on his tongue.

"Over one hundred years ago people started to get seriously afraid that the Machine Age would turn them into a race of robots. That mass production and consumption, the mass media of a now instantaneous communication, the subtle and often subliminal techniques of advertising and propaganda, plus the growing

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use of group—and hypnotherapy would turn them into a bunch of identical puppets. That wearing the same clothes, driving the same cars, living in look-alike suburban homes, reading the same pop books and listening to the same pop programs, they'd start thinking the same thoughts and having the same feelings and urges and end up with rubber-stamp personalities.

"Make no mistake, this fear was very real," Diskrow went on, leaning his weight on the table and scowling. "It was just about the keynote of the whole Twentieth Century (and of course to some degree it's still with us). The world was getting too big for any one man to comprehend, yet people were deeply afraid of groupthink, teamlife, hive-living, hypoconformity, passive adjustment, and all the rest of it. The sociologist and analyst told them they had to play 'roles' in their family life and that didn't help much, because a role is one more rubber stamp. Other cultures like Russia offered us no hope—they seemed further along the road to robot life than we were.

"In short, people were deathly afraid of loss of identity, loss of the sense of being unique human beings. First and always they dreaded depersonalization, to give it its right name.

"Now that's where Individuality Unlimited, operating under its time-honored slogan 'Different Ways to Be Different,' got its start," Diskrow continued, making a scooping gesture, as if his right hand were IU gathering up the loose ends of existence. "At first our methods were pretty primitive or at least modest—we sold people individualized doodads to put on their cars and clothes and houses, we offered conversation kits and hobby guides, we featured Monthly Convention-Crushers and Taboo-Breakers that sounded very daring but really weren't—" (Diskrow grinned and gave a little shrug) "—and incidentally we came in for a lot of ribbing on the score that we were trying to mass-produce individuality and turn out uniqueness on an assembly line. Actually a lot of our work still involves randomizing pattern-details and introducing automatic unpredictable variety into items as diverse as manufactured objects and philosophies of life.

"But in spite of the ribbing we kept going because we knew we had hold of a sound

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idea: that if a person can be made to *feel* he's different, if he is encouraged to take the initiative in expressing himself in even a rather trivial way, then his inner man wakes up and takes over and starts to operate under his own steam. What people basically need is a periodic shot in the arm. I bunk you not when I tell you that here IU has always done and is still doing a real public service. We don't necessarily give folks new personalities, but we renew the glow of those they have. As a result they become happier workers, better citizens. We make people individuality-certain."

"Uniqueness - convinced," Miss Rawvetch put in brightly.

"Depersonalization - secure," Dr. Gline chimed. He was a small man with a large forehead and a permanent hunch to his shoulders. He added: "Only a man who is secure in his own individuality can be at one with the cosmos and really benefit from the tranquil awe-inspiring rhythms of the stars, the seasons, and the sea."

At that windy remark David Cruxon quirked a second grimace and scribbled something on the pad in front of him.

Diskrow nodded approvingly—at Gline. "Now as IU began to see the thing bigger, it had to enter new fields and accept new responsibilities. Adult education, for example—one very genuine way of making yourself more of an individual is to acquire new knowledge and skills. Three-D shows—we needed them to advertise and dramatize our techniques. Art—self-expression and a style of one's own are master keys to individuality, though they don't unlock everybody's inner doors. Philosophy—it was a big step forward for us when we were able to offer people 'A Philosophy of Life That's Yours Alone.' Religion—that too, of course, though only indirectly . . . strictly non-sectarian. Childhood lifeways—it's surprising what you can do in an individualizing way with personalized games, adult toys, imaginary companions, and secret languages—and by recapturing and adapting something of the child's vivid sense of uniqueness. Psychology—indeed yes, for a person's individuality clearly depends on how his mind is organized and how fully its resources are used. Psychiatry too—it's amazing how a knowledge of the workings of abnormal minds can be used

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to suggest interesting patterns for the normal mind. Why—"

Dr. Snowden cleared his throat. The noise was slight but the effect was ominous. Diskrow hurried on to say, "Of course we were well aware of the serious step we were taking in entering this field, so we added to our staff a large psychology department of which Dr. Gline is the distinguished c u r r e n t chief."

Dr. S n o w d e n nodded thoughtfully at his professional colleague across the table. Dr. Gline blinked and hastily nodded back. Unnoticed, David Cruxon got off a third derisive grin.

Diskrow continued: "But I do want to emphasize the psychological aspect of our work —yes, and the psychiatric too—because they've led us to such fruitful ideas as our program of 'Soft-Sell Your Superiority,' which last year won a Lasker Group Award of the American P u b l i c Health Association."

Miss Rawvetch broke in eagerly: "And which was dramatized to the public by that still-popular 3-D show, The Useless Five, featuring the beloved characters of the Inferior Superman, the Mediocre Mutant, the Mixed-up Martian, the Clouded Esper and Rickety Robot."

D i s k r o w nodded. "*And* which also has led, by our usual reverse-twist technique, to our latest program of 'Accent the Monster in You.' Might as well call it our Monster Program." He gave Wisant a frank smile. "I guess that's the item that's been bothering you gentlemen and so I'm going to let you hear about it from the young man who created it—under Dr. Gline's c l o s e supervision. Dave, it's all yours."

Dave Cruxon stood up. He wasn't as tall as one would have expected. He nodded around rapidly.

"Gentlemen," he said in a deep but stridently annoying voice, "I had a soothing little presentation worked up for you. It was designed to show that IU's Monster Program is completely trivial and one hundred percent innocuous." He let that sink in, looked a r o u n d sardonically, then went on with, "Well, I'm tossing that presentation in the junk-chewer! — because I don't think it does justice to the seriousness of the situation or to the great service IU is capable of rendering the cause of public health. I may step on some toes but I'll try

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not to break any phalanges."

Diskrow shot him a hard look that might have started out to be warning but ended up enigmatic. Dave grinned back at his boss, then his expression became grave.

"Gentlemen," he said, "A spectre is haunting America —the spectre of Depersonalization. Mr. Diskrow and Dr. Gline mentioned it but they passed over it quickly. I won't. Because depersonalization kills the mind. It doesn't mean just a weary sense of sameness and of life getting dull, it means forgetting who you are and where you stand, it means that we laymen still persist in calling insanity."

Several pairs of eyes went sharply to him at that word. Gline's chair creaked as he turned in it. Diskrow laid a hand on the psychiatrist's sleeve as if to say, "Let him alone—maybe he's building toward a reverse angle."

"Why this very real and well-founded dread of depersonalization?" David Cruxon looked around. "I'll tell you why. It's not *primarily* the Machine Age, and it's not *primarily* because life is getting too complex to be easily grasped by any one person—though those are factors. No, it's because a lot of blinkered Americans, spoonfed a sickeningly sweet version of existence, are losing touch with the basic facts of life and death, hate and love, good and evil. In particular, due to a lot too much hypno-soothing and suggestion techniques aimed at easy tranquility, they're losing a conscious sense of the black depths in their own natures—and that's what's making them fear depersonalization *and actually making them flip*—and that's what IU's Monster-in-You Program is really designed to remedy!"

There was an eruption of comments at that, with Diskrow starting to say, "Dave doesn't mean—", Gline beginning, "I disagree. I would *not* say—", and Snowden commencing, "Now if you bring in depth psychology—" but Dave added decibels to his voice and overrode them.

"Oh yes, superficially our Monster Program just consists of hints to our customers on how to appear harmlessly and handsomely sinister, but fundamentally it's going to give people a glimpse of the real Mr. Hyde in themselves —the deviant, the cripple, the outsider, the potential rapist and torture-killer—under the sugary hypno-soothed consciousness of Dr. Jekyll. In a story or play, people always

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love the villain best—though they'll seldom admit it—because the villain stands for the submerged, neglected, and unloved dark half of themselves. In the Monster Program we're going to awaken that half for their own good. We're going to give some expression, for a change, to the natural love of adventure, risk, melodrama, and sheer wickedness that's part of every man!"

"Dave, you're giving an unfair picture of your own program!" Diskrow was on his feet and almost bellowing at Cruxon. "I don't know why—maybe out of some twisted sense of self-criticism or some desire for martyrdom — but you are! Gentlemen, IU is not suggesting in its new program that people become real monsters in any way—"

"Oh, aren't we?"

"Dave, shut up and sit down! You've said too much already. I'll—"

"Gentlemen!" Wisant lifted a hand. "Let me remind you that this is a democratic conference. We can all speak freely. Any other course would be highly suspicious. So simmer down, gentlemen, simmer down." He turned toward Dave with a bland warm smile. "What Mr. Cruxon has to say interests me very much.'

"I'm sure it does!" Diskrow fumed bitterly.

Dave said smoothly, "What I'm trying to get over is that people can't be pampered and soothed and wrapped away from the ugly side of reality and stay sane in the long run. Half truth kills the mind just as surely as lies. People live by the shock of reality—especially the reality of the submerged sections of their own minds. It's only when a man knows the worst about himself and other men and the world that he can really take hold of the facts—brace himself against his atoms, you might say—and achieve true tranquility. People generally don't like tragedy and horror —not with the Sunday-School side of their minds, they don't —but deep down they have to have it. They have to break down the Pollyanna Partition and find what's really on the other side. An all-sugar diet is deadly. Life can be sweet, yes, but only when the contrast of horror brings out the taste. Especially the horror in a man's heart!"

"Very interesting indeed," Dr. Snowden put in quietly, even musingly, "and most lavishly expressed, if I may say so. What Mr. Cruxon has to

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tell us about the dark side of the human mind—the Id, the Shadow, the Death Wish, the Sick Negative, there have been many names—is of course an elementary truth. However . . ." He paused. Diskrow, still on his feet, looked at him with suspicious incredulity, as if to say, "Whose side are *you* pretending to be on?"

The smile faded from Snowden's face. "However," he continued, "it is an equally elementary truth that it is dangerous to unlock the dark side of the mind. Not every psychotherapist — not even every analyst—" (Here his gaze flickered toward Dr. Gline) "—is really competent to handle that ticklish operation. The untrained person who attempts it can easily find himself in the position of the sorceror's apprentice. Nevertheless . . ."

"It's like the general question of human freedom," Wisant interrupted smoothly. "Most men are simply not qualified to use all the freedoms theoretically available to them." He looked at the IU people with a questioning smile. "For example, I imagine you all know something about the antigravity harness used by a few of our special military units?—at least you know that such an item exists?"

Most of the people across the table nodded. Diskrow said, "Of course we do. We even had a demonstration model in our vaults until a few days ago." Seeing Wisant's eyebrows lift he added impressively, "IU is often asked to help introduce new devices and materials to the public. As soon as the harness was released, we were planning to have Inferior Supe use it on The Useless Five show. But then the directive came through restricting the item—largely on the grounds that it turned out to be extremely dangerous and difficult to operate — and we shipped back our model."

Wisant nodded. "Since you know that much, I can make my point about human freedom more easily. Actually (but I'll deny this if you mention it outside these chambers) the antigravity harness is not such a specialist's item. The average man can rather easily learn to operate one. In other words it is today technologically possible for us to put three billion humans in the air, flying like birds.

"But three billion humans in the air would add up to confusion, anarchy, an un-

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imaginable aerial traffic jam. Hence — restriction and an emphasis on the dangers and extreme difficulties of using the harness. The freedom to swim through the air can't be given outright, it must be doled out gradually. The same applies to all freedoms—the freedom to love, the freedom to know the world, even the freedom to know yourself—especially your more explosive drives. Don't get me wrong now—such freedoms are fine if the person is conditioned for them." He smiled with frank pride. "That's our big job, you know: conditioning people for freedom. Using conditioning - for - freedom techniques we ended juvenile delinquency and beat the Beat Generation. We—"

"Yes, you beat them all right!" Dave, breaking in again suddenly, sounded raspingly angry. "You got all the impulses such movements expressed so well battened down, so well repressed and decontaminated, that now they're coming out as aberration, deep neurosis, mania. People are conforming and adjusting so well, they're such carbon copies of each other, that now they're even all starting to flip at the same time. They were over-protected mentally and emotionally. They were shielded from the truth as if it were radioactive—and maybe in its way it is, because it can start chain reactions. They were treated like halfwits and that's what we're getting. Age of Tranquility! It's the Age of Psychosis! It's an open secret that the government and its Committee for Public Sanity have been doctoring the figures on mental disease for years. They're fifty, a hundred percent greater than the published ones—no one knows how much. What's this mysterious Report K we keep hearing about? Which of us hasn't had friends and family members flipping lately? Anyone can see the overcrowding at asylums, the bankruptcy of hypnotherapy. This is the year of the big payoff for generation of hysterical optimism, reassurance psychology and plain soft-soaping. It's the DTs after decades of soothing-syrup addiction!"

"That's enough, Dave!" Diskrow shouted. "You're fired! You no longer speak for IU. Get out!"

"Mr. Diskrow!" Wisant's voice was stern. "I must point out to you that you're interfering with free inquiry, not to mention individuality. What your young colleague has to say interests me more

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and more. Pray continue, Mr. Cruxon." He smiled like a big fat cat.

Dave answered smile with glare. "What's the use?" he said harshly. "The Monster Program's dead. You got me to cut its throat and now you'd like me to finish severing the neck, but what I did or didn't do doesn't matter a bit—you were planning to kill the Monster Program in any case. You don't want to do anything to stop the march of depersonalization. You like depersonalized people. As long as they're tranquil and manageable, you don't care—it's even okay by you if you have to keep 'em in flip-factories and put the tranquility in with a needle. Government by the three Big Cs of Commission, Committee and Conference! There's a fourth C, the biggest, and that's the one you stand for—government by Censorship! So long, everybody, I hope you're happy when your wives and kids start flipping—when *you* start flipping. I'm getting out."

Wisant waited until Dave got his thumb on the door, then he called, "One moment, Mr. Cruxon!" Dave held still though he did not turn around. "Miss Sturges," Wisant continued, "would you please give this to Mr. Cruxon?" He handed her the small folded sheet of pink paper from his breast pocket. Dave shoved it in his pocket and went out.

"A purely personal matter between Mr. Cruxon and myself," Wisant explained, looking around with a smile. He swiftly reached across the table and snagged the scratch-pad where Dave had been sitting. Diskrow seemed about to protest, then to think better of it.

"Very interesting," Wisant said after a moment, shaking his head. He looked up from the pad. "As you may recall, Mr. Cruxon only used his stylus once—just after Dr. Gline had said something about the awe-inspiring rhythms of the sea. Listen to what he wrote." He cleared his throat and read:

> *"When the majestic ocean starts to sound like water slopping around in the bathtub, it's time to jump in."*

Wisant shook his head. "I must say I feel concerned about that young man's safety . . . his *mental* safety."

"*I* do too," Miss Rawvetch interjected, looking around with a helpless shrug. "My Lord, was there *anybody* that

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screwball forgot to antagonize?"

Dr. Snowden looked up quickly at Wisant. Then his gaze shifted out and he seemed to become abstracted.

Wisant continued: "Mr. Diskrow, I had best tell you now that in addition to my advisement against the Monster Program, I am going to have to issue an advisement that there be a review of the mental stability of IU's entire personnel. No personal reflection on any of you, but you can clearly see why."

Diskrow flushed but said nothing. Dr. Gline held very still. Dr. Snowden began to doodle furiously.

A monster is a master symbol of the secret and powerful, the dangerous and unknown, evoking the remotest mysteries of nature and human nature, the most dimly-sensed enigmas of space, time, and the hidden regions of the mind.

—the notebooks of A.S.

Masks of monsters brooded down from all the walls—full - lipped raven - browed Dracula, the cavern - eyed dome - foreheaded Phantom, the mighty patchwork visage of Dr. Frankenstein's charnel-man with his filmy strangely compassionate eyes, and many earlier and later fruitions of the dark half of man's imagination. Along with them were numerous stills from old horror movies (both 3-D and flat), blown-up book illustrations, monster costumes and disguises including an Ape Man's hairy hide, and several big hand-lettered slogans such as "Accent Your Monster!" "Watch Out, Normality!" "America, Beware!" "Be Yourself — in Spades!" "Your Lady in Black," and "Mount to Your Monster!"

But Dave Cruxon did not look up at the walls of his "Monsterarium." Instead he smoothed out the pink note he had crumpled in his hand and read the crimson script for the dozenth time.

Please excuse my daughter for not attending lunch today, she being detained in consequence of a massive psychosis. (Signed and Sealed on the threshold of Serenity Shoals)

The strangest thing about Dave Cruxon's reaction to the note was that he did not notice at all simply how weird it was, how strangely the central fact was stated, how queerly the irony was expressed, how like it was to an excuse sent by a pretentious

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mother to her child's teacher. All he had mind for was the central fact.

Now his gaze did move to the walls. Meanwhile his hands automatically but gently smoothed the note, then opened a drawer, reached far in and took out a thick sheaf of sheets of pink notepaper with crimson script, and started to add the new note to it. As he did so a brown flattened flower slipped out of the sheaf and crawled across the back of his hand. He jerked back his hands and stood staring at the pink sheets scattered over a large black blotter and at the wholly inanimate flower.

The phone tingled his wrist. He lunged at it.

"Dave Cruxon," he identified himself hoarsely.

"Serenity Shoals, Reception. I find we do have a patient named Gabrielle Wisant. She was admitted this morning. She cannot come to the phone at present or receive visitors. I would suggest, Mr. Cruxon, that you call again in about a week or that you get in touch with—"

Dave put back the phone. His gaze went back to the walls. After a while it became fixed on one particular mask on the far wall. After another while he walked slowly over to it and reached it down. As his fingers touched it, he smiled and his shoulders relaxed, as if it reassured him.

It was the face of a devil—a green devil.

He flipped a little smooth lever that could be operated by the tongue of the wearer and the eyes glowed brilliant red. Set unobtrusively in the cheeks just below the glowing eyes were the actual eyeholes of the mask—small, but each equipped with a fisheye lens so that the wearer would get a wide view.

He laid down the mask reluctantly and from a heap of costumes picked up what looked like a rather narrow silver breastplate or corselet, stiffly metallic but hinged at one side for the convenience of the person putting it on. To it were attached strong wide straps, rather like those of a parachute. A thin cable led from it to a small button-studded metal cylinder that fit in the hand. He smiled again and touched one of the buttons, and the hinged breastplate rose toward the ceiling, dangling its straps and dragging upward his other hand and arm. He took his finger off the button and the breastplate sagged toward the floor.

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He set the whole assembly beside the mask.

Next he took up a wicked-looking pair of rather stiff gloves with horny claws set at the finger-ends. He also handled and set aside a loose one-piece suit.

What distinguished both the gloves and the coverall was that they glowed whitely even in the moderately bright light of the Monsterarium.

Finally he picked up from the piled costumes what looked at first like a large handful of nothing—or rather as if he had picked up a loose cluster of lenses and prisms made of so clear a material as to be almost invisible. In whatever direction he held it, the wall behind was distorted as if seen through a heat-shimmer or as reflected in a crazy-house mirror. Sometimes his hand holding it disappeared partly and when he thrust his other arm into it, that arm vanished.

Actually what he was holding was a robe made of a plastic textile called *light-flow fabric*. Rather like lucite, the individual threads of the light-flow fabric carried or "piped" the light entering them, but unlike lucite they spilled such light after carrying it roughly halfway around a circular course. The result was that anything draped in light-flow fabric became roughly invisible, especially against a uniform background.

Dave laid down the light-flow fabric rather more reluctantly than he had put down the mask, breastplate and other items. It was as if he had laid down a twisting shadow.

Then Dave clasped his hands behind him and began to pace. From time to time his features worked unpleasantly. The tempo of his pacing quickened. A smile came to his lips, worked into his cheeks, became a fixed, hard, graveyard grin.

Suddenly he stopped by the pile of costumes, struck an attitude, commanded hoarsely, "My hauberk, knave!" and picked up the silver breastplate and belted it around him. He tightened the straps around his thighs and shoulders, his movements now sure and swift.

Next, still grinning, he growled, "My surcoat, sirrah!"—and donned the glowing coverall.

"Vizard!" "Gauntlets!" He put on the green mask and the clawed gloves.

Then he took up the robe of light-flow fabric and

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started for the door, but he saw the scattered pink notes.

He brushed them off the black blotter, found a white stylus, and gripping it with two fingers and thumb extended from slits in the right-hand gauntlet, he wrote:

Dear Bobbie, Dr. Gee, et al,

By the time you read this, you will probably be hearing about me on the news channels. I'm doing one last bang-up public relations job for dear old IU. You can call it Cruxon's Crusade—the One-Man Witchcraft. I've tried out the equipment before, but only experimentally. Not this time! This time when I'm finished, no one will be able to bury the Monster Program. Wish me luck on my Big Hexperiment—you'll need it!—because the stench is going to be unendurable.

Your little apprentic demon, D.C.

He threw the stylus away over his shoulder and slipped on the robe of light-flow fabric, looping part of it over his head like a cowl.

Some twenty minutes ago a depressed young man in business jerkin and shorts had entered the Monsterarium.

Now an exultant-hearted heat-shimmer, with a reserve glow under its robe of invisibility, exited from it.

There is a batable ground between madness and sanity, though few tread it: laughter.

—the notebooks of A.S.

Andreas Snowden sat in Joel Wisant's bedroom trying to analyze his feelings of annoyance and uneasiness and dissatisfaction with himself—and also trying to decide if his duty lay here or back at Serenity Shoals.

The windoor was half open on fast-fading sunlight. Through it came a medley of hushed calls and commands, hurried footsteps, twittering female laughter, and the sounds of an amateur orchestra self-consciously tuning up—the Twilight Tranquility Festival was about to begin.

Joel Wisant sat on the edge of the bed looking toward the wall. He was dressed in green tights, jerkin, and peaked cap—a Robin Hood costume for the Festival. His face wore a grimly intent, distant expression. Snowden decided that here was a part of his reason for feeling annoyed—it is always irritating to be in the same room with someone who is communicating silently by micromike and sofstspeaker. He knew that Wisant was at the moment in touch with Security—not with Securitor Harker, who was downstairs

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and probably likewise engaged in silent phoning, but with the Central Security Station in New Angeles—but that was all he did know.

Wisant's face relaxed somewhat, though it stayed grim, and he turned quickly toward Snowden, who seized the opportunity to say, "Joel, when I came here this afternoon, I didn't know anything about—" but Wisant cut him short with: "Hold it, Andy! —and listen to this. There have been at least a dozen new mass-hysteria outbreaks in the NLA area in the past two hours." He rapped it out tersely. "Traffic is snarled on two ground routes and swirled in three 'copter lanes. If safety devices hadn't worked perfectly there'd have been a hatful of deaths and serious injuries. There've been panics in department stores, restaurants, offices, and at least one church. The hallucinations are developing a certain amount of pattern, indicating case-to-case infection. People report something rushing invisibly through the air and buzzing them like a giant fly. I'm having the obvious lunatics held—those reporting hallucinations like green faces or devilish laughter. We can funnel 'em later to psychopathic or your place—I'll want your advice on that. The thing that bothers me most is that a garbled account of the disturbances has leaked out to the press. 'Green Demon Jolts City,' one imbecile blatted! I've given orders to have the involved 'casters and commentators picked up—got to try to limit the infection. Can you suggest any other measures I should take?"

"Why, no, Joel—it's rather out of my sphere, you know," Snowden hedged. "And I'm not too sure about your theory of infectious psychosis, though I've run across a little *folie a deux* in my time. But what I did want to talk to you about—"

"Out of your sphere, Andy? What do you mean by that?" Wisant interrupted curtly. "You're a psychologist, a psychiatrist — mass hysteria's right up your alley."

"Perhaps, but security operations aren't. And how can you be so sure, Joel, that there isn't something real behind these scares?"

"Green faces, invisible fliers, Satanic laughter?—don't be ridiculous, Andy. Why, these are just the sort of outbreaks Report K predicts. They're like the two cases here last night. Wake up, man!—this is a major emergency."

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"Well . . . perhaps it is. It still isn't up my alley. Get your loonies to Serenity Shoals and I'll handle them." Snowden raised his hand defensively. "Now wait a minute, Joel, there's something *I* want to say. I've had it on my mind ever since I heard about Gabby. I was shocked to hear about that, Joel—you should have told me about it earlier. Anyway, you had a big shock this morning. No, don't tell me differently—it's bound to shake a man to his roots when his daughter aberrates and does a symbolic murder on him or beside him. You simply shouldn't be driving yourself the way you are. You ought to have postponed the IU hearing this morning. It could have waited."

"What?—and have taken a chance of more of that Monster Material getting to the public?"

Snowden shrugged. "A day or two one way or the other could hardly have made any difference."

"I disagree," Wisant said sharply. "Even as it is, it's touched off this mass hysteria and—"

"—if it is mass hysteria—"

Wisant shook his head impatiently. "—and we had to show Cruxon up as an irresponsible mischief maker. You must admit that was a good thing."

"I suppose so," Snowden said slowly. "Though I'm rather sorry we stamped on him quite so hard—teased him into stamping on himself, really. He had hold of some very interesting ideas even if he was making bad use of them."

"How can you say that, Andy? Don't you psychologists ever take things seriously?" Wisant sounded deeply shocked. His face worked a little. "Look, Andy, I haven't told anybody this, but I think Cruxon was largely responsible for what happened to Gabby."

Snowden looked up sharply. "I keep forgetting you said they were acquainted. Joel, how deep did that go? Did they have dates? Do you think they were in love? Were they together much?"

"I don't know!" Wisant had started to pace. "Gabby didn't have dates. She wasn't old enough to be in love. She met Cruxon when he lectured to her communications class. After that she saw him in the daytime—only once or twice, I thought—to get material for her course. But there must have been more than that. There must have been things Gabby didn't tell me. I

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don't know how far they went, Andy, I don't know!"

He broke off because a plump woman in flowing Greek robes of green silk had darted into the room.

"Mr. Wisant, you're 'on' in ten minutes!" she cried, hopping with excitement. Then she saw Snowden. "Oh excuse me."

"That's quite all right, Mrs. Potter," Wisant told her. "I'll be there on cue."

She nodded happily, made an odd pirouette, and darted out again. Simultaneously the orchestra outside, which sounded as if composed chiefly of flutes, clarinets and recorders, began warbling mysteriously.

Snowden took the opportunity to say quickly, "Listen to me, Joel. I'm worried about the way you're driving yourself after the shock you had this morning. I thought that when you came home here you'd quit, but now I find that it's just so you can participate in this community affair while keeping in touch at the same time with those NLA scares. Easy does it, Joel—Harker and Security Central can handle those things."

Wisant looked at Snowden. "A man must attend to *all* his duties," he said simply. "This is *serious*, Andy, and any minute *you* may be involved whether you like it or not. What do you think the danger is of an outbreak at Serenity Shoals?"

"Outbreak?" Snowden said uneasily. "What do you mean?"

"I mean just that. You may think of your patients as children, Andy, but the cold fact is that you've got ten thousand dangerous maniacs not three miles from here under very inadequate guard. What if they are infected by the mass hysteria and stage an outbreak?"

Snowden frowned. "It's true we have some inadequately trained personnel these days. But you've got the wrong picture of the situation. Emotionally sick people don't stage mass outbreaks. They're not syndicate crooks with smuggled guns and dynamite."

"I'm not talking about plotted outbreaks. I'm talking about mass hysteria. If it can infect the sane, it can infect the insane. And I know the situation at Serenity Shoals has become very difficult—very difficult for you, Andy—with the overcrowding. I've been keeping in closer touch with that than you may know. I'm aware that you've peti-

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tioned that lobotomy, long-series electroshock, and heavy narcotics be reintroduced in general treatment."

"You've got that wrong," Snowden said sharply. "A minority of doctors—a couple of them with political connections—have so petitioned. I'm dead set against it myself."

"But most families have given consent for lobotomies."

"Most families don't want to be bothered with the person who goes over the edge. They're willing to settle for anything that will 'soothe' him."

"Why do you headshrinkers always have to sneer at decent family feelings?" Wisant demanded stridently. "Now you're talking like Cruxon."

"I'm talking like myself! Cruxon was right about too much soothing syrup—especially the kind you put in with a needle or a knife."

Wisant looked at him puzzledly. "I don't understand you, Andy. You'll have to do something to control your patients as the overcrowding mounts. With this epidemic mass hysteria you'll have hundreds, maybe thousands of cases in the next few weeks. Serenity Shoals will become a . . . a Mind Bomb! I always thought of you as a realist, Andy."

Snowden answered sharply, "And I think that when you talk of thousands of new cases, you're extrapolating from too little data. 'Dangerous maniacs' and 'mind bombs' are theater talk—propaganda jargon. You can't mean that, Joel."

Wisant's face was white, possibly with suppressed anger, and he was trembling very slightly. "You won't say that, Andy, if your patients erupt out of Serenity Shoals and come pouring over the countryside in a great gush of madness."

Snowden stared at him. "You're afraid of them," he said softly. "That's it—you're afraid of my loonies. At the back of your mind you've got some vision of a stampede of droolers with butcher knives." Then he winced at his own words and slumped a little. "Excuse me, Joel," he said, "but really, if you think Security Shoals is such a dangerous place, why did you let your daughter go there?"

"Because *she* is dangerous," Wisant answered coldly. "I'm a realist, Andy."

Snowden blinked and then nodded wearily, rubbing his eyes. "I'd forgotten about this morning." He looked

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around. "Did it happen in this room?"

Wisant nodded.

"Where's the pillow she chopped up?" Snowden asked callously.

Wisant pointed across the room at a box that was not only wrapped and sealed as if it contained infectious material, but also corded and the cord tied in an elaborate bow. "I thought it should be carefully preserved," he said.

Snowden stared. "Did you wrap that box?"

"Yes. Why?"

Snowden said nothing.

Harker came in, asking, "Been in touch with the Station the last five minutes, Joel? Two new outbreaks. A meeting of the League for Total Peace Through Total Disarmament reports that naked daggers appeared from nowhere and leaped through the air, chasing members and pinning the speaker to his rostrum by his jerkin. One man kept yelling about poltergeists—we got *him*. And the naked body of a man weighing 300 pounds fell spang in the middle of the Congress of the SPECP—that's the Society for the Prevention of Emotional Cruelty to People. Turned out to be a week-old corpse stolen from City Hospital Morgue. Very fragrant. Joel, this mass-hysteria thing is broadening out."

Wisant nodded and opened a drawer beside his bed.

Snowden snorted. "A solid corpse is about as far from mass hysteria as you can get," he observed. "What do you want with that hot-rod, Joel?"

Wisant did not answer. Harker showed surprise.

"You stuck a heat-gun in your jerkin, Joel," Snowden persisted. "Why?"

Wisant did not look at him, but waved sharply for silence. Mrs. Potter had come scampering into the room, her green robes flying.

"You're on, Mr. Wisant, you're *on!*"

He nodded at her coolly and walked toward the door just as two unhappy-looking men in business jerkins and shorts appeared in it. One of them was carrying a rolled-up black blotter.

"Mr. Wisant, we want to talk to you," Mr. Diskrow began. "I should say we *have* to talk to you. Dr. Gline and I were making some investigations at the IU offices—Mr. Cruxon's in particular—and we found—"

"Later," Wisant told them loudly as he strode by.

"Joel!" Harker called urgently, but Wisant did not

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pause or turn his head. He went out. The four men looked after him puzzledly.

The Twilight Tranquility Festival was approaching its muted climax. The Pixies and Fairies (girls) had danced their woodland ballet. The Leprechauns and Elves (boys) had made their Flashlight Parade. The Greenest Turf, the Growingest Garden, the Healthiest Tree, the Quietest 'Copter, the Friendliest House, the Rootedest Family, and many other silently superlative exurban items had been identified and duly admired. The orchestra had played all manner of forest, brook, and bird music. The Fauns and Pans (older boys) had sung "Tranquility So Masterful," "These Everlasting Knolls," the Safety Hymn, and "Come Let's Steal Quietly." The Sprites and Nymphs (older girls) had done their Candlelight Saraband. Representing religion, the local Zen Buddhist pastor (an old Caucasian Californian) had blessed the gathering with a sweet-sour wordlessness. And now the everpopular Pop Wisant was going to give his yearly talk and award trophies. ("It's tremendous of him to give of himself this way," one matron said, "after what he went through this morning. Did you know that she was stark naked? They wrapped a blanket around her to put her aboard the 'copter but she kept pulling it off.")

Freshly cut boughs attached to slim magnesium scaffolding made, along with the real trees, a vast leafy bower out of what had this morning been an acre of lawn. Proud mothers in green robes and dutiful fathers in green jerkins lined the walls, shepherding their younger children. Before them stood a double line of Nymphs and Sprites in virginal white ballet costumes, each holding a tall white candle tipped with blue-hearted golden flame.

Up to now it had been a rather more nervously gay Tranquility Festival than most of the mothers approved. Even while the orchestra played there had been more than the usual quota of squeals, little shrieks, hysterical giggles, complaints of pinches and prods in the shadows, candles blown out, raids on the refreshment tables, small children darting into the bushes and having to be retrieved. But Pop Wisant's talk would smooth things out, the worriers told themselves.

And indeed as he strode be-

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tween the ranked nymphs with an impassive smile and mounted the vine-wreathed podium, the children grew much quieter. In fact the hush that fell on the leafy Big Top was quite remarkable.

"Dear friends, charming neighbors, and fellow old coots," he began—and then noticed that most of the members of the audience were looking up at the green ceiling.

There had been no wind that evening, no breeze at all, but some of the boughs overhead were shaking violently. Suddenly the shaking died away. ("My, what a sudden gust that was," Mrs. Ames said to her husband. Mr. Ames nodded vaguely—he had somehow been thinking of the lines from Macbeth about Birnam Wood coming to Dunsinane.)

"Fellow householders and family members of Civil Service Knolls," Wisant began again, wiping his forehead, "in a few minutes several of you will be singled out for friendly recognition, but I think the biggest award ought to go to all of you collectively for one more year of working for tranquility . . ."

The shaking of the boughs had started up again and was traveling down the far wall. At least half the eyes of the audience were traveling with it. ("George!" Mrs. Potter said to her husband, "it looks as if a lot of crumpled cellophane were being dragged through the branches. It all wiggles." He replied, "I forgot my glasses." Mr. Ames muttered to himself: "The wood began to move. Liar and slave!")

Wisant resolutely kept his eyes away from the traveling commotion and continued, ". . . and for one more year of keeping up the good fight against violence, delinquency, irrationality . . ."

A rush of wind (looking like "curdled air," some said afterwards) sped from the rear of the hall to the podium. Most of the candles were blown out, as if a giant had puffed at his giant birthday cake, and the Nymphs and Sprites squealed all the way down the double line.

The branches around Wisant shook wildly. ". . . emotionalism, superstition, and the evil powers of the imagination!" he finished with a shout, waving his arms as if to keep off bats or bees.

Twice after that he gathered himself to continue his talk, although his audience was in a considerable uproar,

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but each time his attention went back to a point a little above their heads. No one else saw anything where he was looking (except some "curdled air"), but Wisant seemed to see something most horrible, for his face paled, he began to back off as if the something were approaching him, he waved out his arms wildly as one might at a wasp or a bat, and suddenly he began to scream, "Keep it off me! Can't you see it, you fools? Keep it off!"

As he stepped off the podium backwards he snatched something from inside his jerkin. There was a nasty *whish* in the air and those closest to him felt a wave of heat. There were a few shrill screams. Wisant fell heavily on the turf and did not move. A shining object skidded away from his hand. Mr. Ames picked it up. The pistol-shaped weapon was unfamiliar to him and he only later discovered it was a heat-gun.

The foliage of the Great Bower was still again, but a long streak of leaves in the ceiling had instantaneously turned brown. A few of these came floating down as if it were autumn.

Sometimes I think of the whole world as one great mental hospital, its finest people only inmates trying out as aides.

The notebooks of A.S.

It is more fun than skin-diving to soar through the air in an antigravity harness. That is, after you have got the knack of balancing your field. It is deeply thrilling to tilt your field and swoop down at a slant, or cut it entirely and just drop—and then right it or gun it and go bounding up like a rubber ball. The positive field around your head and shoulders creates an air cushion against the buffeting of the wind and your own speed.

But after a while the harness begins to chafe, your sense of balance gets tired, your gut begins to resent the slight griping effects of the field supporting you, and the solid ground which you first viewed with contempt comes to seem more and more inviting. David Cruxon discovered all of these things.

Also, it is great fun to scare people. It is fun to flash a green demon mask in their faces out of nowhere and see them blanch. Or to glow white in the dark and listen to them scream. It is fun to snarl traffic and panic pedestrians and break up solemn gatherings—the solemner the better—with rude or shocking

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intrusions. It is fun to know that your fellow man is little and puffed up and easily terrified and as in love with security as a baby with his bottle, and to prove it on him again and again. Yes, it is fun to be a practicing monster.

But after a while the best of Halloween pranks becomes monotonous, fear reactions begin to seem stereotyped, you start to see yourself in your victims, and you get ashamed of winning with loaded dice. David Cruxon discovered this too.

He had thought after he broke up the Tranquility Festival that he had hours of mischief left in him. The searing near-miss of Wisant's hot-rod had left him exhilarated. (Only the light-flow fabric, diverting the infrared blast around him, had saved him from dangerous, perhaps fatal burns.) And now the idea of stampeding an insane asylum had an ironic attraction. And it *had* been good sport at first, especially when he invisibly buzzed two sand-cars of aides into a panic so that they went careening over the dunes on their fat tires, headlight beams swinging frantically, and finally burst through the light fence on the landward side (giving rise to a rumor of an erupting horde of ravening madmen). *That* had been very good fun indeed, rather like harmlessly strafing war refugees, and after it Dave had shucked off his robe and hood of invisibility and put on a Glowing Phantom aerobatic display, diving and soaring over the dark tiny hills, swooping on little groups with menacing phosphorescent claws and peals of Satanic laughter.

But that didn't prove to be nearly as good fun. True, his victims squealed and sometimes ran, but they didn't seem to panic permanently like the aides. They seemed to stop after a few steps and come back to be scared again, like happily hysterical children. He began to wonder what must be going on in the minds down there if a Glowing Phantom were merely a welcome diversion. Then the feeling got hold of him that those people down there saw through him and sympathized with him. It was a strange feeling—both deflating and heart-warming.

But what really finished Dave off as a practicing monster was when they started to cheer him—cheer him as if he were their champion returning in triumph. Cruxon's Crusade—was that what he'd

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called it? And was this his Holy Land? As he asked himself that question he realized that he was drifting wearily down toward a hilltop on a long slow slant and he let his drift continue, landing with a long scuff.

Despite the cheers, he rather expected to be gibbered at and manhandled by the crowd that swiftly gathered around him. Instead he was pàtted on the back, congratulated for his exploits at New Angeles, and asked intelligent questions.

Gabby Wisant's mind had fully determined to stay underground a long time. But that had been on the assumptions that her body would stay near Daddikins at Civil Service Knolls and that the thing that had taken control of her body would stay hungry and eager. Now those assumptions seemed doubtful, so her mind decided to risk another look around.

She found herself one of a scattered crowd of people wandering over sandhills in the dark. Some memories came to her, even of the morning, but not painfully enough to drive her mind below. They lacked pressure.

There was an older woman beside her—a rather silly and strangely affected woman by her talk, yet somehow likable—who seemed to be trying to look after her. By stages Gabby came to realize it must be her mother.

Most of the crowd were following the movements of something that glowed whitely as it swooped and whirled through the air, like a small demented comet far off course. After a bit she saw that the comet was a phosphorescent man. She laughed.

Some of the people started to cheer. She copied them. The glowing man landed on a little sand hill just ahead. Some of the crowd hurried forward. She followed them. She saw a young man stepping clumsily out of some glowing coveralls. The glow let her see his face.

"Dave, you idiot!" she squealed at him happily.

He smiled at her shamefacedly.

Doctor Snowden found Dave and Gabby and Beth Wisant on a dune just inside the break in the wire fence —the last of the debris from last night's storm. The sky was just getting light. The old man motioned back the aides with him and trudged up the sandy rise and sat down on a log.

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"Oh, hello, Doctor," Beth Wisant said. "Have you met Gabrielle? She came to visit me just like I told you."

Dr. Snowden nodded tiredly. "Welcome to Serenity Shoals, Miss Wisant. Glad to have you here."

Gabby smiled at him timidly. "I'm glad to be here too—I think. Yesterday . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"Yesterday you were a wild animal," Beth Wisant said loudly, "and you killed a pillow instead of your father. The doctor will tell you that's very good sense."

Dr. Snowden said, "All of us have these somatic wild animals—" (He looked at Dave) "—these monsters."

Gabby said, "Doctor, do you think that Mama calling me so long ago can have had anything to do with what happened to me yesterday?"

"I see no reason why not," he replied, nodding. "Of course there's a lot more than that that's mixed up about you."

"When *I* implant a suggestion, it works," Beth Wisant asserted.

Gabby frowned. "Part of the mix-up is in the world, not me."

"The world is always mixed up," Dr. Snowden said. "It's a pretty crazy hodge-podge with sensible strains running through it, if you look for them very closely. That's one of the things we have to accept." He rubbed his eyes and looked up. "And while we're on the general topic of unpleasant facts, here's something else. Serenity Shoals has got itself one more new patient besides yourselves—Joel Wisant."

"Hum," said Beth Wisant. "Maybe now that I don't have him to go home to, I can start getting better."

"Poor Daddikins," Gabby said dully.

"Yes," Snowden continued, looking at Dave, "that last little show you put on at the Tranquility Festival — and then on top of it the news that there was an outbreak here—really broke him up." He shook his head. "Iron perfectionist. At the end he was even demanding that we drop an atomic bomb on Serenity Shoals—that was what swung Harker around to my side."

"An atom bomb!" Beth Wisant said. "The idea!"

Dr. Snowden nodded. "It does seem a little extreme."

"So you class me as a psychotic too," Dave said, a shade argumentively. "Of course I'll admit that after what I did—"

Dr. Snowden looked at him

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sourly. "*I* don't class you as psychotic at all—though a lot of my last-century colleagues would have taken great delight in tagging you as a psychopathic personality. I think you're just a spoiled and willful young man with no capacity to bear frustration. You're a self-dramatizer. You jumped into the ocean of aberration—that was the meaning of your note, wasn't it?—but the first waves tossed you back on the beach. Still, you got in here, which was your main object."

"How do you know that?" Dave asked.

"You'd be surprised," Dr. Snowden said wearily, "at how many more-or-less sane people want to get into mental hospitals these days—it's probably the main truth behind the Report K figures. They seem to think that insanity is the only great adventure left man in a rather depersonalizing age. They want to understand their fellow man at the depths, and here at least they get the opportunity." He looked at Dave meaningfully as he said that. Then he went on, "At any rate, Serenity Shoals is the safest place for you right now, Mr. Cruxon. It gets you out from under a stack of damage suits and maybe a lynch-mob or two."

He stood up. "So come on then, all of you, down to Receiving," he directed, a bit grumpily. "Pick up that junk you've got there, Dave, and bring it along. We'll try to hang onto the harness—it might be useful in treating gravitational dementia. Come on, come on!—I've wasted all night on you. Don't expect such concessions in the future. Serenity Shoals is no vacation resort — and no honeymoon resort either!—though . . ." (He smiled flickeringly) ". . . though some couples do try."

They followed him down the sandy hill. The rising sun behind them struck gold from the drab buildings and faded tents ahead.

Dr. Snowden dropped back beside Dave. "Tell me one thing," he said quietly. "Was it fun being a green demon?"

Dave said, "That it was!"

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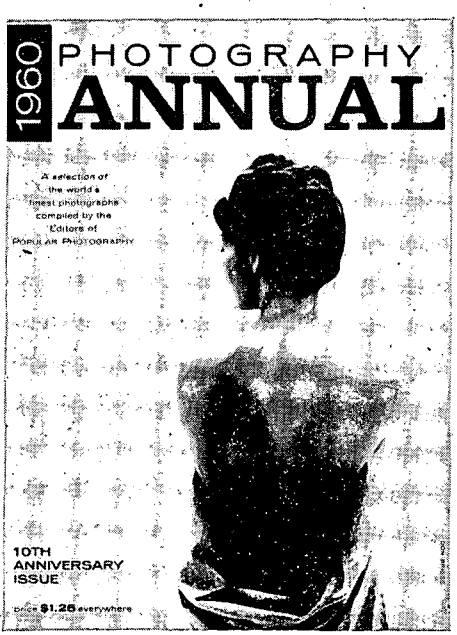

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